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2020: THE YEAR IN REVIEW

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FROM the DESK OF...

BY THE TIME you read this, 2020 will officially be in the rearview mirror. This was a difficult year for wrestling. Government-mandated shutdowns led promotions around the world to shutter their doors ... some never to reopen. Economic concerns forced reliable venues to close, as well as some journeyman independent grapplers to hang up their boots for good.

With independent wrestling events shut down worldwide, the #SpeakingOut movement offered survivors of abuse and assault a receptive audience to share their stories. While the movement was inspiring, the alleged conditions that led to it were, of course, anything but.

WWE and AEW continued to operate, running shows throughout the pandemic. Each company was impacted at various points by COVID—not only because of lost revenue, but by talent and crew who either contracted the virus or had to quarantine after being exposed to it. Fans and pundits alike continue to debate whether running shows in 2020 was actually a good idea, but you know what they say about hindsight.

Personally, 2020 was a year of tremendous highs and lows. If you're a regular reader, you likely know that I was tapped by Stu Saks to take over the role of Editor-in-Chief of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*. It's been an absolute joy to work on this magazine full-time. I've learned so much about the history of *PWI* while aiming to help it evolve. But, away from *PWI*, this has been the most challenging year I could have imagined.

Back in April, my grandmother, who had long suffered from dementia (and lived in a nursing home), was taken from us by COVID. Hundreds of thousands of families this year came to know the pain of mourning that was delayed, isolated, or otherwise less than ideal.

Around the same time my grandmother passed, my wife Megan was struggling with escalating G.I. issues that were clearly more serious than the acid reflux her doctor had initially suspected. It took us months of specialist appointments and tests to learn that she was actually battling advanced bile duct cancer, which had spread to her liver.

Megan, who hasn't yet turned 35, is the kindest, most thoughtful person you could meet—the kind of person who feels a real responsibility to the world around her. She's devoted countless weekends to helping shelter animals. She offers to babysit for free because she loves kids (and their parents). She even learned how to make her own soap because she heard recycling plastic was bad for the environment. As you can imagine, her diagnosis has hit all of us—Megan, myself, her loved ones—pretty hard.

I know that many of our readers have battled a horrific disease like cancer (or loved someone who has). Please know that my thoughts are with you. Witnessing Megan's battle, doing whatever I can to support her, I see the toll serious illness can take.

As an optimist, I'd like to leave you with this: Now, as always, professional wrestling offers me a measure of comfort through the dark and unknown. Whether you're a lifelong fan or someone who just picked up this magazine on a whim, I sincerely hope that the squared circle provides some light for you, too. And I hope that *PWI*, even if only in some small way, helps enhance and enrich your enjoyment of this beautiful sport/art form/catharsis we know as professional wrestling. Thank you for reading ... and thank you for being a fan.

Kevin McElvaney
Editor-in-Chief

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Maxwell Jacob Friedman

We're sure MJF isn't too happy about the fact that he didn't win any *PWI* Awards in 2020. However, it's worth noting that he came pretty close in one category: Most Hated Wrestler of the Year. Granted, if Mr. "Salt of the Earth" *had* been given that distinction, we might have never heard the end of it!

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In the last few issues, we've given our rankings of the world's top singles and tag team wrestlers. But, as is our tradition, we've now handed the reins over to you, the reader. This year's Achievement Awards saw fierce competition in almost every category, with first-time nominees (and winners) galore!

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Some of the most incredible photographers in the business traveled the globe to chronicle many of the year's significant title changes.

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Once again, our readers proved that they can be witty, insightful, and downright insulting!

66 TOP 10 STORIES OF 2020

In a year where travel was discouraged and the roars of crowds were silenced, professional wrestling found ways to innovate. From Wrestle Kingdom to WrestleMania and heel turns to hanging up the boots, these are the most newsworthy stories of the year.

74 MEMORIES OF 2020: STAFF PICKS

Our entire staff of writers, old and new, was invited to share their strongest memories of the last 12 months. Here's what they said.

RINGSIDE

WITH HARRY BURKETT

CAN AEW AND Impact Wrestling work together? And, if so, for how long? Those were the burning questions at the end of AEW's "Winter Is Coming" special on December 2, arguably the most consequential two hours in the short history of the company. **Kenny Omega** ended **Jon Moxley's** nine-month World title reign with the ringside support of longtime friend **Don Callis**.

Omega is an executive vice president of AEW. Callis, in addition to his role as Impact color commentator and inter-promotional meddler, is also executive vice president of Impact Wrestling. Is there more or less than meets the eye here?

It was significant that Omega made his first appearance as AEW champion at Impact's Final Resolution, streaming on Impact Plus and FITE TV. Callis referred to Omega meeting up with fellow **Bullet Club** alumni **Karl Anderson** and **Doc Gallows** as a "family reunion," suggesting Omega's ties to Impact were stronger than his ties to AEW.

This could go in a multitude of directions in the coming months. Will Callis simply serve as a casual advisor to Omega, with the new champ making title defenses in both AEW and Impact? Since it is important to Omega to establish the AEW title as a world championship in the strongest

sense, it's easy to imagine defenses in Mexico's AAA and New Japan. Is the goal to establish the AEW championship as the true world title for everywhere outside WWE?

What about a mega-faction of global proportions? Omega could serve as the linchpin between Anderson and Gallows in Impact and **Cody Rhodes** and **The Young Bucks** in AEW. With Omega as AEW champion and Anderson and Gallows as Impact tag champs, this supergroup could dominate both promotions, plus New Japan and AAA. Only the Bullet Club came close to such dominance. Talk about a New World Order!

Maybe AEW President **Tony Khan**—along with EVPs Omega, Rhodes, and **Nick & Matt Jackson**—believe they can deal with Callis, **Scott D'Amore**, and Anthem Sports & Entertainment. AEW, beating *NXT* on a weekly basis in its secure time slot on TNT, would have the upper hand in the relationship. AEW would gain exposure on AXS-TV, where Omega already developed a following on New Japan's weekly show, and Impact would get a huge boost with even greater exposure on TNT.

The social-media buzz is tremendous. North American fans aren't accustomed to seeing successful inter-promotional relationships. It's reminiscent of ECW's mini-invasion of the WWF in the late-1990s. Vince McMahon conceded to that storyline in his fight against WCW, and ECW—like Impact today—was thrilled with the exposure. But any AEW-Impact storylines will be front and center, not a desperate sideshow.

Omega's title win and new alliance with Callis was only one of the two major headlines coming out of what **Jim Ross** promised would be *Dynamite's* "biggest episode yet." Many fans reported feeling chills as **Tony**

"The Cleaner" Kenny Omega delivers his signature sign-off catchphrase on the December 9 edition of *Dynamite*. Omega has also appeared on recent episodes of *Impact TV* and, at press time, was set to compete in a six-man tag at *Hard to Kill*.



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



The Undertaker took what is planned to be his final curtain call at the 2020 Survivor Series, which took place 30 years after his unforgettable WWE debut.

Schiavone announced, “It’s **Sting**,” just as he had on the occasion of Sting’s match against **Ric Flair** during the final edition of *WCW Monday Nitro* nearly 20 years earlier. Sting’s return to TNT was a historic moment, leading to as many questions as the Omega-Callis affair: Will Sting trust Rhodes, particularly with **Arn Anderson** as his advisor? Will he sit in the rafters for 18 months? What can the 61-year-old legend offer AEW?

Having more questions than answers often leads to high ratings. *Dynamite*’s viewership numbers surged to 995,000 the following week, as fans sought answers to all these questions. That created more distance between *Dynamite* and *NXT*, which drew 659,000 viewers. Tony Khan’s desire to reach one million viewers—as *Dynamite* did with its premiere back on October 2, 2019—plus the continued ratings war with *NXT* has clearly inspired AEW’s big moves.

and foes, including **Kane**, **Triple H**, **The Big Show**, **Shawn Michaels**, and Ric Flair. The bell sounded 10 times, signifying the end of the Undertaker character.

This frees **Mark Calaway** to close this chapter and explore other opportunities. We’ve seen him on the WWE Network’s *The Last Ride* documentary and with **Steve Austin** during his *Broken Skull Sessions*. Let’s hope this amazing personality embraces a second chapter.

The Undisputed Era entered *NXT*’s War Games for the fourth time, and this time emerged victorious against Team McAfee, comprised of **Pat McAfee**, **Danny Burch**, **Oney Lorcan**, and **Pete Dunne**. All eight men were battered in the unrelenting 45-minute match. No one looked like winners among the carnage, but it was **Adam Cole**, **Bobby Fish**, **Kyle O’Reilly**, and **Roderick Strong** with their hands raised, and newcomer McAfee—while playing a psychological game

of duck-and-dodge during War Games—proved his mettle by withstanding brutal punishment, even stealing the show by jumping off the top of the cage onto the seven combatants below. I don’t know how that was supposed to help his teammates, but it was gutsy nonetheless.

Raquel Gonzalez delivered a breakthrough performance in the Women’s War Games by helping Team Candice—including **Candice LeRae**, **Dakota Kai**, and new-attitude **Toni Storm**—defeat Team Shotzi, comprised of **Shotzi Blackheart**, **Ember Moon**, **Rhea Ripley**, and *NXT* Women’s champ **Io Shirai**. Like McAfee, Shirai earned the highlight-reel moment by jumping off the top of the cage, but inside of a steel trash can! Gonzalez ultimately ended up pinning Shirai to score the win for her team.

In other notable matches, **Johnny Gargano** became the first man to win the North American title three times by defeating **Damian Priest** and defending champ **Leon Ruff** in a triple-threat match ... **Dexter Lumis** forced **Cameron Grimes** into submission ... **Tommaso Ciampa** pinned **Timothy Thatcher** in rugged technical grinder.

Mike Bennett returned to Ring of Honor, infuriated by the shambles of his former Kingdom. **Matt Taven**, **Vincent Marseglia**, and **T.K. O’Ryan** continued the faction with the blessing of former leader Bennett, who went on to Impact Wrestling and WWE. But a resentful Marseglia attacked O’Ryan and turned on Taven, forming **The Righteous** with **Bateman** and other misfits. Now a tag team war is heating up, pitting Bennett and Taven vs. Marseglia and Bateman.

I was glad to see the returning **John Walters**, who faced **Tracy Williams** in a pure wrestling match on *Ring Of Honor*

It seems official: Sting vs. **The Undertaker** will never happen. Just as Sting mysteriously appeared on *Dynamite*, The Undertaker exited the stage less than two weeks earlier at Survivor Series 2020, exactly 30 years after the “Dead Man” made his debut. A final farewell to The Undertaker concluded the pay-per-view. It was typical ‘Taker: The long walk amid the purple lights and fog ... the organ music ... and the mythic aura. Only Undertaker has the star-power to captivate millions by doing so little. **Vince McMahon** gave a goodbye speech as Undertaker was surrounded by friends

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I was glad to see the returning **John Walters**, who faced **Tracy Williams** in a pure wrestling match on *Ring Of Honor*



Zelina Vega brutalizes Asuka during their summer 2020 Raw Women's title feud. Vega was released by WWE in November—reportedly for violating company policy regarding third-party social media platforms.

Wrestling after a 14-year absence. Walters looked terrific, and I hope he sticks around to mentor young talent and reclaim the Pure division. It will be interesting to see if Williams will challenge **Jonathan Gresham** for the Pure championship, considering Williams, Gresham, **Jay Lethal**, and **Rhett Titus** have formed their own faction, The Foundation, with the goal of “purifying” ROH.

If nothing else, they'll be stiff competition for ROH's Los Ingobernables faction, comprised of **Rush**, **Dragon Lee**, and **Kenny King**.

This 'n' that: **Becky Lynch** and **Seth Rollins** announced the birth of their daughter, **Roux Lopez ... Pac** returned to AEW ... Raquel Gonzalez continued her momentum with a win over Ember Moon on *NXT* as her partner, Dakota Kai, recovered from War Games ... Rhea Ripley is expected to join the Raw or Smackdown brands after her loss to NXT Women's champ Io Shirai ... WWE released

Zelina Vega, reportedly because of her use of Twitch in violation of WWE's policy of not allowing its superstars to use third-party platforms. She tweeted in favor of unionization shortly before the announcement of her release.

Pat Patterson, whose influence extended far beyond his respectable in-ring career, died of cancer on December 2. He was 79. Patterson grew up in an impoverished family in Montreal to become Vince McMahon's right-hand man in WWE, all as a gay man in a decidedly alpha-male industry.

In his 2016 autobiography, *Accepted*, Patterson said his life changed when a free ticket to a local wrestling card was included in a loaf of bread purchased during a week when his family couldn't afford meat. He was awestruck by headliner **Buddy Rogers**. Patterson turned pro in Montreal in 1958 and gained more experience in Detroit and then the Pacific Northwest.

Patterson hit his stride in San Francisco in the late-1960s, teaming with **Ray Stevens** as **The Blond Bombers**. Patterson and Stevens are regarded as one of the best tag teams ever, in terms of working ability and psychology. He held the San Francisco version of the NWA tag team title with Stevens on two occasions, and nine other times with **Superstar Graham**, **Pedro Morales**, **Pepper Gomez**, **Peter Maivia**, **Moondog Mayne**, **Rocky Johnson**, and **Tony Garea**.

He then ventured to Amarillo, where—as **Lord Patrick Patterson**—he feuded with ex-partner Stevens, resulting in Stevens defeating him for the NWA North American title. Later that same year, 1968, Patterson wrestled **Antonio Inoki** several times during a six-week tour of Japan. After a brief run in Florida, he reunited with Stevens in the AWA, where they held the World tag belts.

Patterson achieved his in-ring claim to fame, supposedly winning the WWF Intercontinental title in a fabled tournament in Rio de Janeiro. Originally managed by **The Grand Wizard**, Patterson eventually turned fan favorite and battled **Sgt. Slaughter** in a feud culminating in an Alley Fight at New York's Madison Square Garden. He served as Vince McMahon's color commentator on *Championship Wrestling* as a final feud with **Ivan Koloff** rounded out his active in-ring career.

Then only in his early-40s, Patterson became important behind the scenes, working in a talent-relations capacity and as an assistant to McMahon. He created the Royal Rumble concept.

His career did generate controversy, however. Contemporary reporting found that Patterson was often complicit in many of the WWF's scandals of the



Pat Patterson had a profound impact on professional wrestling, both in the ring and behind the curtain. His recent passing was mourned far and wide by wrestlers and wrestling fans.

early-1990s, including known steroid use and sexual improprieties. Colleagues **Murray Hodgson** and **Tom Cole** accused Patterson of sexual harassment, resulting in a brief departure from the WWF in 1992.

Patterson nonetheless remained very popular within the WWF, particularly in its locker room. He achieved notoriety in the late-1990s as, along with **Jerry Brisco**, one of McMahon's stooges in the WWF owner's feud with Steve Austin. On July 22, 2019, he became the oldest champion in WWE history, pinning **Drake Maverick** for the WWE 24/7 title.

Patterson's longtime partner of 40 years, **Louie Dondero**, died in 1998.

Other deaths include **Tommy "Tiny" Lister**, who played opposite **Hulk Hogan** in the 1989 movie *No Holds Barred*, and subsequently teamed with **Randy Savage** in a losing effort against Hogan and **Brutus Beefcake** at that year's SummerSlam (age 62); and **Bob Ryder**, who, as a pioneer of wrestling's online community in the mid-1990s, created 1Wrestling.com and worked for ECW and WCW before joining **Jerry and Jeff Jarrett** to launch TNA (age 64).

That's all for now. Save a ringside seat for me. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

INTER-PROMOTIONAL BUZZ

AEW World champion Kenny Omega forming an alliance with Impact Executive VP Don Callis is reminiscent of other inter-promotional ventures, such as Jerry Lawler vs. Kerry Von Erich at SuperClash 3, Pro Wrestling USA, and Ric Flair vs. Bob Backlund at the Omni. Most would agree the hype surpassed the finished product in all these cases. But if we get Omega vs. Impact champ Rich Swann in a singles bout, it may be another story.

REST IN PEACE, UNDERTAKER

I thought The Undertaker was finished after he defeated Triple H in their "End Of An Era" match at WrestleMania 28. I thought he was dead and buried when he placed his hat and gloves in the ring following his loss to Roman Reigns at 'Mania 33. But now it really appears to be over, as WWE Chairman and CEO Vince McMahon had the last word on Undertaker's career at Survivor Series. There will never be another career like this one.

PATTERSON'S LEGACY

Pat Patterson rose from poverty to excel in a sport that was his passion. For me, broadcast partners McMahon and Patterson were the first images I saw on a wrestling program. Yet the WWF's scandals in the early-1990s stained everyone who was an active participant or willing accomplice in that corrupt culture. That is part of his legacy, but I prefer to remember the proud French-Canadian who made wrestling a pleasure to watch.

RYDER IN THE SKY

Bob Ryder was not an in-ring celebrity prior to becoming a force behind the scenes—therefore, he never received the ink or credit he truly deserved. Ryder sat in a fishing boat with Jerry and Jeff Jarrett back in 2002, and pitched the idea of weekly pay-per-views, which gave birth to TNA and eventually Impact Wrestling. Without Ryder, there'd be no X division, no superstardom for AJ Styles, no Impact on Tuesday nights. He changed the game.

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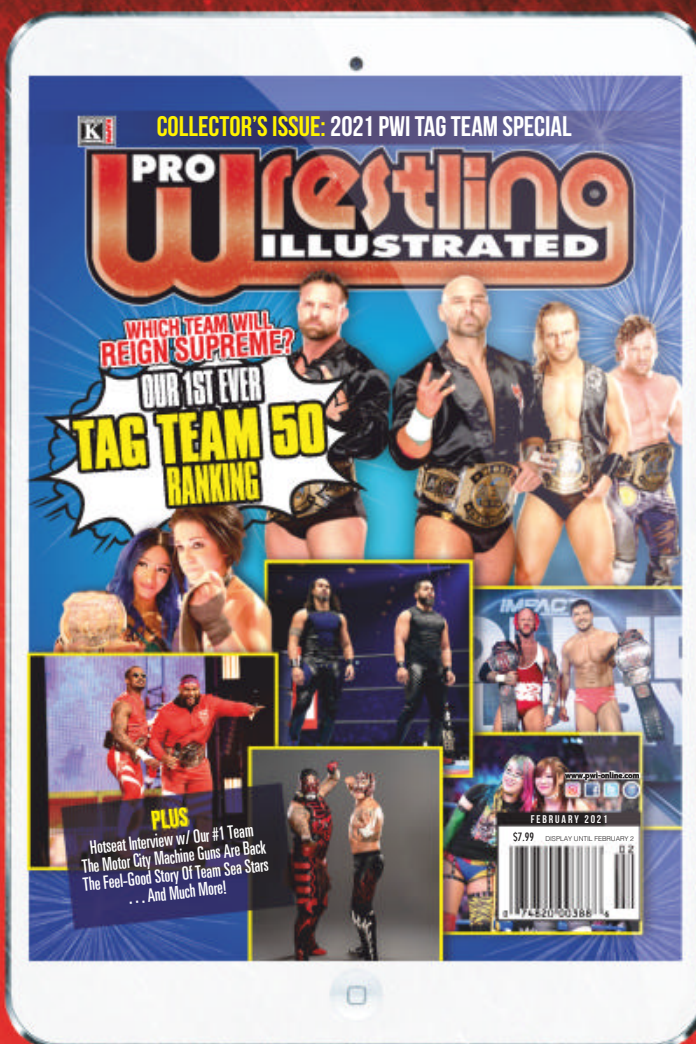
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ACHIEVEMENT

2020

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

SECTION COMPILED BY JASON McVEIGH,
AL CASTLE, & HARRY BURKETT

ONLY ON ONE occasion has our Editors' Award for Lifetime Achievement been given out twice in a single year. In 1988, we chose to honor Adrian Adonis and Bruiser Brody—both of whom had been tragically killed in their prime.

This year, we are once again choosing to honor two recipients. Thankfully, both of them are very much alive and well! The reason for the change is simple: There are just *so many* deserving individuals who deserve to be recognized for their contributions to the wrestling industry. And, just as Hall of Fame classes in sports and entertainment usually consist of several inductees, we thought it made sense to honor at least two people in a given year.

Apart from dual Stanley Weston Awards, longtime readers will notice a few other surprises in this year's edition. If you've already looked at the cover of this issue for more than a few seconds, you've seen that this year's Most Popular Wrestler is somewhat of a controversial choice. Despite being a clear favorite amongst AEW faithful, many purists are skeptical of Orange Cassidy. But the numbers don't lie—Cassidy pulled a close,

but certifiable victory out of his famous pockets, leaving this year's #1-ranked wrestler, Jon Moxley, in the first runner-up slot.

Don't worry about Mox, though. Not only does he have his *PWI* 500 win to celebrate, but he and his wife, Renee Young, are expecting their first child in 2021. And, to sweeten the pot a little more, he's also been voted 2020's Wrestler of the Year by *PWI* readers. Not bad at all!

Another surprise this year? Sasha Banks and Bayley won both Tag Team of the Year and Feud of the Year. Never has a duo claimed both awards in a single year ... let alone for feuding with one another.

Finally, you'll notice that, in multiple categories, the sum total of "Votes For Others" is greater than the percentage of votes garnered by the winner. While it's true these winners received a smaller share of the total votes than in previous years, this is actually a good thing. It means the competition was that much steeper—with more promotions represented—than in years past.

Without further ado, we hope you enjoy this year's Achievement Awards section. And, before writing us, keep in mind that these were YOUR PICKS!

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

IT HAS BEEN said that with great opportunity comes great expectation. And, indeed, the wrestling highway is littered with the memories of sons who failed to break down doors that their famous last names may have opened for them. Imagine, then, the expectation that comes with not only being the son of a successful wrestler, but the son of perhaps the greatest high-flyer in wrestling history. Thankfully for Dominik Mysterio, the 23-year-old not only lived up to those expectations during his maiden year in the ring, but was impressive enough for our readers to overwhelmingly select him as Rookie of the Year.

Some cynical eyes may have rolled when Dominik began appearing on WWE television without so much as a stint in NXT. But even the harshest of critics had to accept that Mysterio's inaugural match

at SummerSlam against Seth Rollins was, even in defeat, one of the greatest debut matches anyone has ever had in WWE. It turned out to be no fluke, either.

Dominik continued to impress each time he stepped into the ring, including picking up a tag team victory alongside his father Rey over Rollins and Murphy at Payback, as well as a win over Murphy in a brutal streetfight on *Raw* that saw him gain much confidence in the process.

While it's wise not to get too carried away with someone's success so early in their career, Dominik Mysterio made the most of the opportunities his rookie year and his famous surname provided him. And, with a natural athleticism and hereditary fearlessness, the stage is surely set for bigger and better things down the road.

18%



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

ANNA JAY

The devilish daughter of The Dark Order pushed AEW Women's champion Hikaru Shida to her limit in a globally televised title bout in November but came up just shy of winning the gold. Still, not bad for someone who, until then, only had 14 professional matches to her name. Two of those matches came in the AEW Women's Tag Team Cup tournament, where Jay reached the semi-finals with her partner Tay Conti. Even without the sinister Dark Order backing her up, Jay has the talent to succeed on her own merits. But, with them, she might be deadly.

8%

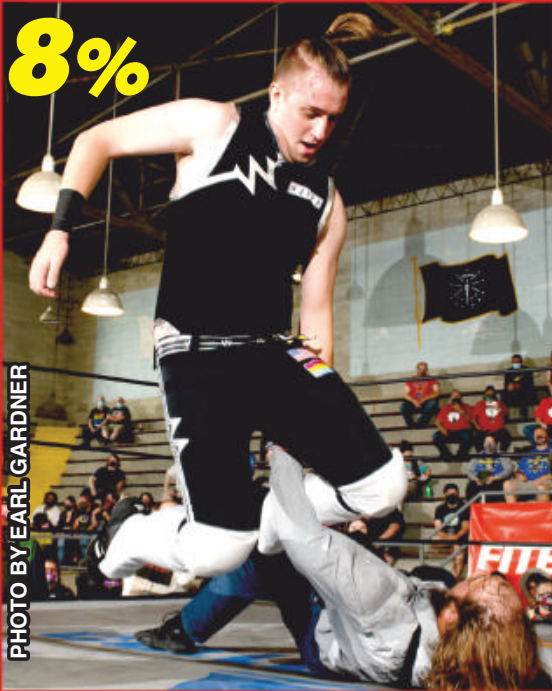


PHOTO BY EARL GARDNER

JOSHUA WAVRA

The "Skeleton Key" of professional wrestling may not have polled quite as well as they'd predicted on social media back in November. Still, to take home 8% of the votes without the benefit of being on national television is nothing to sniff at. Whether in singles competition or as part of the delightfully named Oreo Speedwagon tag team, Wavra is already making waves on the independent scene on landmark shows like Effy's Big Gay Brunch. To do all of this in a year when COVID-19 restrictions severely limited independent talents' opportunities to perform is even more impressive.

6%



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

ABADON

Frightening competitor made her AEW debut in a losing effort to Hikaru Shida last March but went undefeated after that with much success coming on, appropriately, *AEW Dark*. Scored victories over Anna Jay, Red Velvet, and others and overcame a scary in-ring moment where an errant elbow to the throat caused her to stop breathing momentarily. With an appearance and an entrance that haunts viewers and opponents long after a match has started, it's little wonder our readers were impressed (and possibly frightened) enough to cast their votes for Abadon. Expect her to be a fixture of the AEW Women's title scene going forward.

14%

VOTES FOR OTHERS

Some of the top vote-getters who did not capture a runner-up spot include: Matt Makowski, Saya Kamitani, Molly McCoy, and Pat McAfee.



ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

**DOMINIK
MYSTERIO**

54%

MOST IMPROVED WRESTLER OF THE YEAR

TO SAY THAT someone has “improved” carries the implication that the person in question may not have been so great to begin with. But, in the case of this year’s award winner, it’s more of a confirmation that they had a year where they finally achieved what many believed to be their destiny.

When Drew McIntyre first arrived in WWE, an authority no less than Vince McMahon himself proclaimed the Scot to be “The Chosen One.” And while that proclamation seemed ridiculous a few years later as he was gyrating around as a member of Three Man Band, the Drew McIntyre who reemerged in NXT in 2017 after a three-year stint away from WWE was a different beast than the one who had been fired in 2014. Darker, disciplined, and more driven, this McIntyre

seemed determined to prove that McMahon's faith in him wasn't misplaced.

In 2020, Drew McIntyre finally proved Vince right and all the doubters wrong, first by winning the men’s Royal Rumble match and then by defeating Brock Lesnar for the WWE championship at WrestleMania. In the months that followed, “The Scottish Psychopath” transitioned seamlessly into his role as the face of the Raw brand and successfully defended his title against the likes of The Big Show, Seth Rollins, Bobby Lashley, and Randy Orton before finally dropping the belt to Orton at Hell in a Cell ... only to recapture it a month later.

While McIntyre has always been a fine wrestler, the improvements he made over the last year took his career to a whole new level and kept him there. This did not go unnoticed by our readers.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



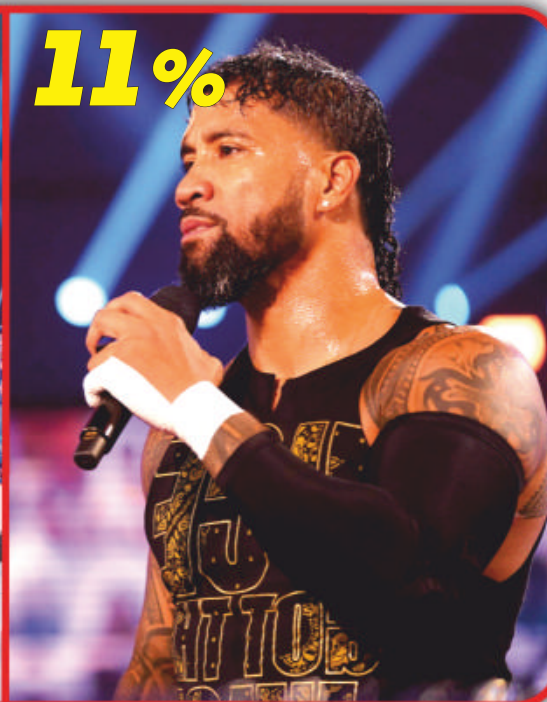
RICKY STARKS

After defeating Tim Storm, Matt Cross, and Trevor Murdoch on the same night to win the NWA Television title tournament, Starks established himself as a major player for the historic brand. When his contract expired in the summer, he found himself as one of the hottest free agents in all of wrestling. Landing in AEW, Starks came up short in his debut match against TNT champion Cody Rhodes but lost none of his swagger in the process. And his subsequent membership in Team Taz has only served to highlight the improvements the 26-year-old is making in the ring.



OTIS

Did Otis improve in 2020? “Oh yeah!” After several years as a tag team wrestler, fan support propelled the former Heavy Machinery member toward singles success with a Money in the Bank ladder match victory and umm, doubles success, by convincing Mandy Rose to be his girlfriend (which actually might have been more impressive). Sadly for Otis, he ended up losing both his Money in the Bank briefcase and his “Peach” to a combination of The Miz and the WWE Draft. But, despite this, our readers recognized the efforts “The Dozer” made to improve both his wrestling and his love life.



JEY USO

On the surface, it may seem strange for someone to pick up votes for being “Most Improved” twelve years into their career. But, then again, no one finished 2020 with such a sudden burst of momentum as Jey Uso. Indeed, thanks to the heartfelt promos he cut leading up to his Universal championship matches with cousin Roman Reigns—and the blistering performances he put on in those matches at Clash Of Champions and Hell in a Cell—Jey Uso permanently stepped out from under the mantle of just being “one of the twins” and delivered, arguably, the best work of his entire career to date.

34% VOTES FOR OTHERS

Some of the top vote-getters who did not capture a runner-up spot include: Sonya Deville, Jacob Fatu, Apollo Crews, and Ace Austin.



**MOST IMPROVED WRESTLER
OF THE YEAR**

**DREW
McINTYRE**

30%

INSPIRATIONAL WRESTLER OF THE YEAR

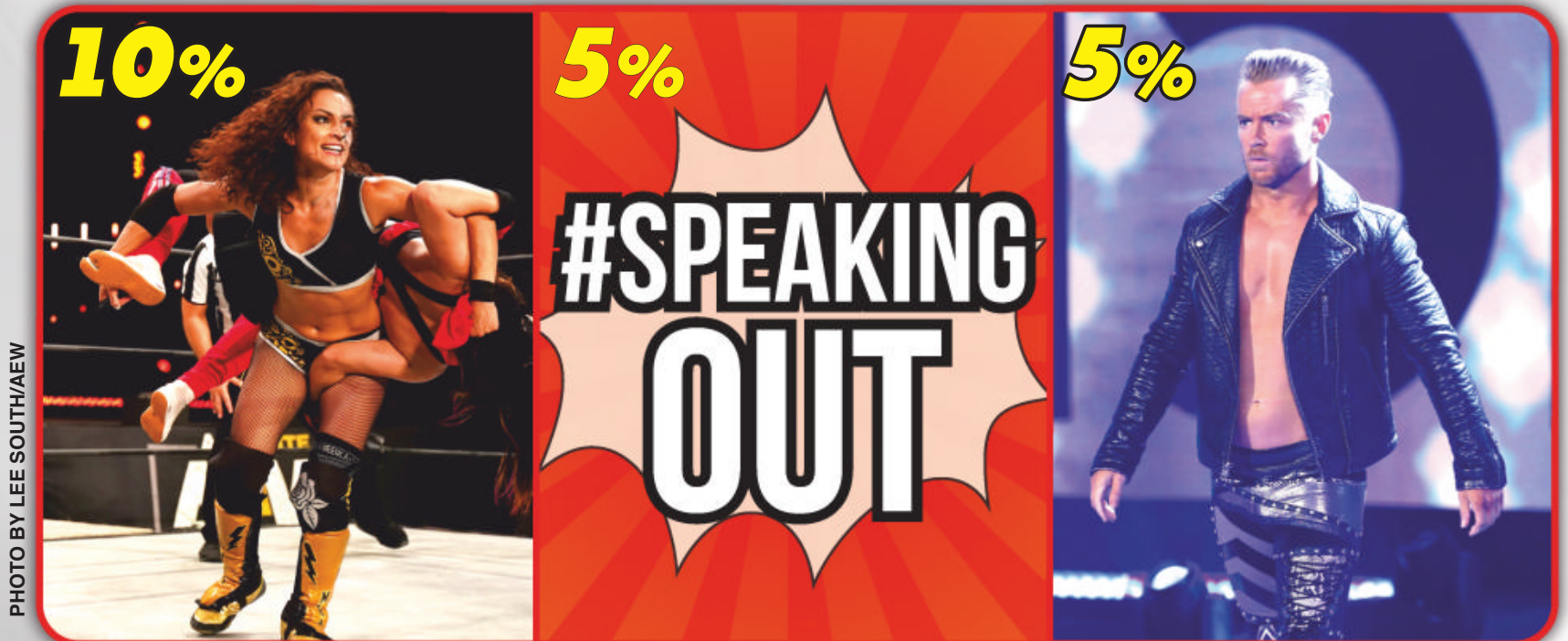
AT 2:15 A.M. on May 20, lifeguards responded to reports of a body seen along the Venice Beach shoreline in Los Angeles. A short time later, authorities were able to confirm the news that many had feared was coming: The body was that of former WWE wrestler Shad Gaspard. Gaspard had gone swimming with his 10-year-old son the previous Sunday when a sudden rip tide pulled them out to sea. Lifeguards managed to briefly speak to Gaspard, who instructed them to save his son first. Just moments later, a wave crashed over him, and he disappeared underwater.

In the ensuing days, search parties frantically looked for Gaspard to no avail. Then, in the early hours of Wednesday morning, the tragic news came through that he had drowned. Gaspard was 39 years old.

Tributes poured in from fans and peers worldwide, who shared warm memories of Gaspard. “I don’t know what’s a bigger heroic act than putting his life on the line for his son,” longtime tag partner JTG told journalist Chris Van Vliet. “But, honestly, he would have done it if it was another child. If it was me, he probably would have did the same exact thing.”

We’re often inspired by the seemingly heroic feats of wrestlers inside the ring. But true heroism, like the kind Gaspard displayed in sacrificing himself to save his son, happens away from the bright lights and arenas. These feats are done by everyday good people, and Shad Gaspard was one of those people.

While fondly remembered as one-half of the fun-loving Cryme Tyme tag team, Gaspard leaves behind a much bigger legacy: a son who can know his father was an inspiration to many.



THUNDER ROSA

Whether it’s becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen, fighting in MMA, gaining a degree from U.C. Berkeley, or generally making the wrestling business a better place for those in it, it’s no wonder why many of our readers found Thunder Rosa to be one of the most inspiring people in wrestling. As hardworking as they come, Rosa came across many fans’ radar for the first time when she won the NWA Women’s championship in 2020. And, after making subsequent appearances in AEW, she firmly established herself as one of the most promising performers in women’s wrestling.

#SPEAKINGOUT MOVEMENT

In a year that saw the wrestling world forced to deal with many changes, none was as overdue as the changes brought about by the #SpeakingOut movement, which saw dozens of women (and some men) come forth on social media with stories of alleged abuse they had suffered at the hands of many well-known wrestling figures. While the stories shared were deeply upsetting, the survivors of these incidents should serve as an inspiration to many. Wrestlers, promoters, and fans alike applauded those in the movement for being courageous enough to share their stories—giving wrestling the chance to be a safer place for all.

DRAKE MAVERICK

Sometimes, it can be easy to forget that the performers in the ring aren’t necessarily the larger-than-life characters they portray. Wrestlers are real people like the rest of us, with bills to pay and families to support. When WWE announced a rash of layoffs in the spring, one of the released talents, Drake Maverick, took to social media to give fans a raw and emotional look at what it felt like to lose not only your job, but your dream. So heartfelt was this peek into real life that WWE was inspired to rehire Maverick, who reached the final of the Cruiserweight title tourney on NXT.

36% VOTES FOR OTHERS

Some of the top vote-getters who did not capture a runner-up spot include: Jey Uso, Nyla Rose, Willie Mack, and Mustafa Ali.



**INSPIRATIONAL WRESTLER
OF THE YEAR**

**SHAD
GASPARD**

44%

COMEBACK OF THE YEAR

A DECADE REMOVED from his first run with WWE, MVP returned and proved rather quickly that time had not slowed him physically, nor eroded any of his Machiavellian tendencies.

While he's enjoyed some success when stepping into the ring—notably scoring victories over Apollo Crews in singles action, and in tag team matches alongside Bobby Lashley against The Viking Raiders—it was in a managerial role that MVP truly shined in 2020.

As confident a public speaker as you're likely to find in WWE, the former United States champion was able to talk Shelton Benjamin and Cedric Alexander into joining Lashley and himself in The Hurt Business faction, which turned out to be a shrewd move on their part as it changed the fortunes of both men virtually overnight. While Lashley, Benjamin, and Alexander

have tasted much success since, it is still MVP who is the undisputed leader of the group.

MVP credits his son as being the inspiration behind his initial return to WWE at the 2020 Royal Rumble, in what was meant to be nothing more than a father wanting one last chance to show his child the superstar that he used to be. Fortunately for everyone involved, that one-off showing led to more. When it became clear that MVP still had what it took to be a star, he quickly became a fixture on Monday nights.

Delve into his life story and you will read about a man who overcame many obstacles, learned from his mistakes, and bettered himself as a person. At 47 years old, MVP is still bettering himself. And, in 2020, our readers felt that no one had a better comeback story.

15%



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13%

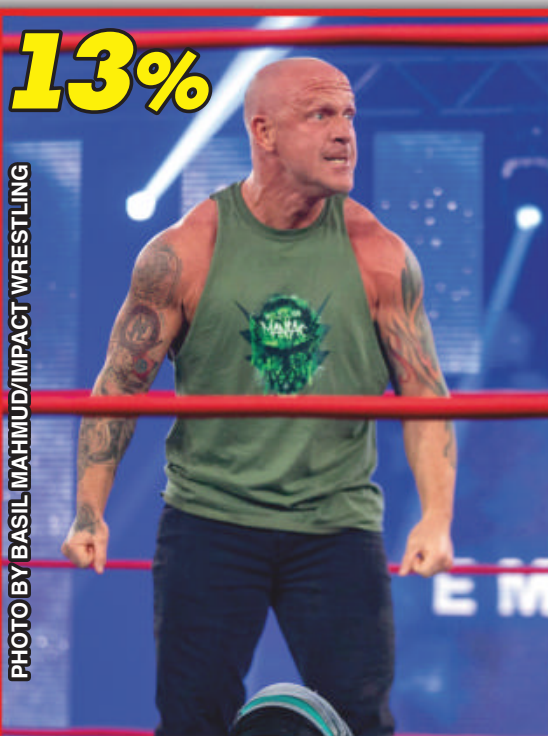
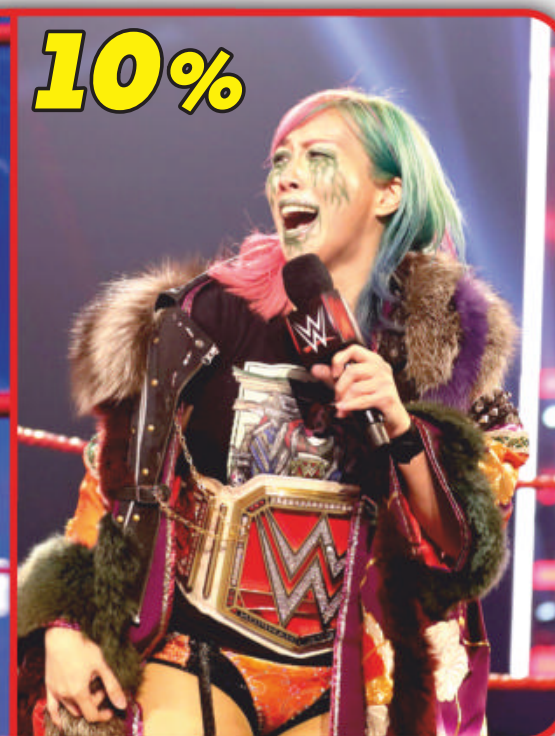


PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING

10%



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RANDY ORTON

While Randy Orton never really went away entirely, our readers seemed to feel that his renewed focus and in-ring success in 2020 warranted votes for Comeback of the Year. Though Orton may have treaded water somewhat in 2019, this past year saw him firmly reestablish himself as one of the best antagonists in the business. Victories over Edge, Kevin Owens, and Keith Lee were impressive, but the icing on the cake came when Orton defeated WWE champion Drew McIntyre at Hell In A Cell to claim his 14th world title to date (and his first since 2017).

ERIC YOUNG

The "World-Class Maniac" never quite got to show WWE fans how world-class he could be, as he was only ever used sparingly on the main roster. After finding himself one of the many talents released by WWE during their spring firing spree, Young returned to his old stomping grounds of Impact Wrestling with the goal of proving that WWE had missed the boat on him. Within two months of his return, Young defeated Eddie Edwards to win the Impact heavyweight championship. By doing so, he proved wrong any doubters he may have had in WWE. Quite the career turnaround!

ASUKA

Even though she held WWE Women's tag team gold for much of 2019, it was really only after her Kabuki Warriors partnership with Kairi Sane ended in 2020 that Asuka was able to remind people just how good she is as a main-event singles competitor. After winning the Women's Money in the Bank ladder match in May—claiming the soon-to-be vacant Raw Women's championship, rather than just a shot at it—Asuka spent the rest of the year (save for a one-month reign by Sasha Banks) as the undisputed queen of Monday nights.

43% VOTES FOR OTHERS

Some of the top vote-getters who did not capture a runner-up spot include: Mickie James, Edge, Ken Shamrock, Chris Sabin, and Rob Van Dam.



COMEBACK OF THE YEAR

MVP

19%

INDEPENDENT WRESTLER OF THE YEAR

THE HEADBANGING INDIE star didn't let COVID-19 restrictions slow down his momentum, as he wrestled matches anywhere and everywhere it was safe to do so—including successful defenses of his IWTW Independent Wrestling championship against the likes of “Speedball” Mike Bailey, Effy, and Rickey Shane Page. WARHORSE also scored wins over Joey Janela on a Warrior Wrestling card and Joshua Bishop on a Black Label Pro event. His “Warhausen” tandem with Danhausen proved successful, despite their divergent opinions on whether or not it's okay to swear.

On July 29, WARHORSE rode into AEW and challenged Cody Rhodes for the TNT championship. And even though he came up short, the appearance and his efforts no doubt raised his profile (and that of the indies) just a little bit more.

At the end of the day, if we are going by big victories alone, then our readers were right in selecting WARHORSE as the Independent Wrestler of the Year. As the man himself might say, his successful run as IWTW champ is proof enough that he does indeed “rule ass.”

14%



PHOTO BY EARL GARDNER

NICK GAGE

The subject of a feature story in the October 2020 issue of *PWI*, Gage shared his incredible tale of redemption . . . and perhaps no one in wrestling embodies the spirit of independence more than Nick Gage. After carving out a long and successful career in deathmatches, the hardcore veteran shows no sign of slowing down, and continued adding to his legacy with consistently brutal matches in Game Changer Wrestling and other promotions. Highly respected by younger indie wrestlers for his honest approach and hardworking attitude, Gage continues to set a standard for others to follow. “MDK all day,” indeed.

10%



PHOTO BY MIKEY NOLAN

AJ GRAY

In a year that saw him successfully defeat an array of opponents, Gray used his platform to speak up about important social issues facing African Americans, including the lack of opportunities for Black pro wrestlers. GCW, a promotion where Gray frequently plies his trade, was inspired to run *For The Culture*—a show spotlighting Black wrestlers, with Gray playing a prominent role as booker and spokesperson. Due to his success in independent promotions across the U.S., A.J. Gray was the top-ranked indie wrestler in the 2020 *PWI* “500” (#63) and the subject of a feature story in our January 2021 issue.

7%



PHOTO BY MIKEY NOLAN

CHRIS DICKINSON

“The Dirty Daddy” proved that independent does not mean inferior by taking it to television stars like AEW’s Jon Moxley and Impact Wrestling’s Cousin Jake on indie shows in 2020. Dickinson also won three matches in one night en route to claiming the GCW Acid Cup in March. An adept striker with some truly brutal power moves, he fared quite well in Beyond Wrestling as well as on United Wrestling Network’s *Primetime Live*. Touted as someone who could transition into a major company if the opportunity arose, Dickinson is one of independent wrestling’s most prized possessions . . . at least, for now.

50% VOTES FOR OTHERS

Some of the top vote-getters who did not capture a runner-up spot include: Allie Kat, Faye Jackson, Heather Monroe, Lee Moriarty, and Trish Adora.



**INDEPENDENT WRESTLER
OF THE YEAR**

WARHORSE

19%

FEUD OF THE YEAR

IT HAS BEEN said before in wrestling that good friends often make better enemies. When it comes to Bayley and Sasha Banks, our readers wholeheartedly agreed, as they overwhelmingly recognized the duo as having had the Feud of the Year.

Personal connections are what make a feud special, and the connection these two ladies shared couldn't get much more personal. Tracing back to their early days in NXT, Bayley and Sasha were almost always linked together in some fashion. And anyone who saw their barn-burning matches together on WWE's third brand knew that if they got the chance to do the same on the main roster, the results would likely be similar. As it turned out, 2020 was the year we got to see the long-awaited encore.

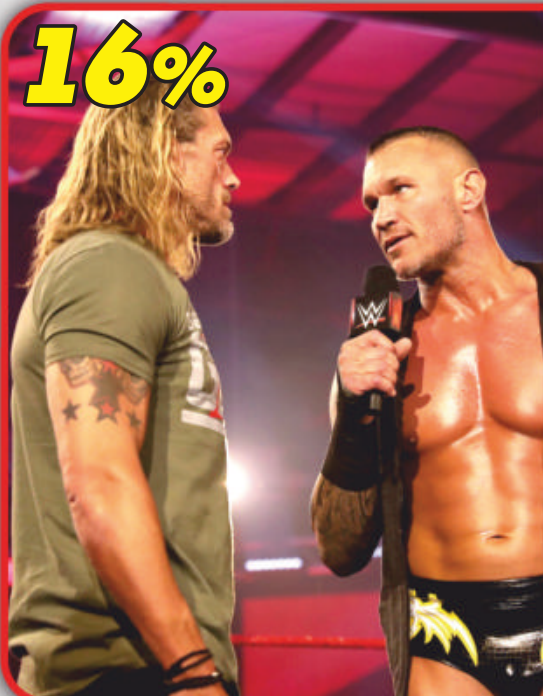
After a highly celebrated run as WWE Women's tag team champions, Bayley turned on Banks, brutally

attacking her following a loss to Nia Jax and Shayna Baszler. In the weeks that followed, Bayley blamed her former partner for any weaknesses they'd had as a team and claimed that she attacked Banks before "The Boss" could do the same to her. Understandably, Banks wasn't buying this explanation, and set about getting revenge on her ex-partner.

Banks would get that revenge in a brutal, near half-hour Hell in a Cell match that left both women exhausted. When the bell rang at the end, it was Banks who ended Bayley's record-smashing Smackdown Women's title reign. Poetic, really, since she had previously helped her hold onto the belt for as long as she had.

Expect this rivalry to continue for quite a while (which might suit our readers just fine).

16%



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EDGE vs. RANDY ORTON

Successful feuds contain many elements, and this one had them all: turning on a friend; harming a man's family; a brutal Last Man Standing war; and a classic wrestling match. In fact, the only disappointing part of Edge and Orton's feud is that we didn't get to see more of it, as Edge was sidelined with a torn triceps after their stellar match at Backlash. With their win tally tied at one apiece, we can no doubt look forward to at least one final match to settle the score when Edge is healthy enough to return.

10%



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

CHRIS JERICHO vs. ORANGE CASSIDY

What's better than seeing an antagonistic bully get his comeuppance? Seeing him get his comeuppance and get dropped into a vat of sticky, orange mimosa! Such is what happened to Chris Jericho at the end of his feud with Orange Cassidy in AEW. Offended by his rival's leisurely nature and perceived lack of star power, Jericho sought to make an example out of Cassidy. But, much to his chagrin, no matter how many beatings he dished out, or how many attempts he made to embarrass him, Cassidy kept coming back for more . . . and proved to the veteran Jericho that he wouldn't be squeezed.

7%



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

MJF vs. CODY RHODES

Despite sage advice from almost everyone he knew, Cody Rhodes truly believed that he could mold MJF into something resembling a halfway-decent human being. When that didn't happen, and "The Salt Of The Earth" inevitably turned on him, it kick-started a feud that was every bit as memorable on the microphone as it was in the ring. Determined not to just walk into a match with his veteran opponent, MJF constructed weeks of painful obstacles for Rhodes to get through first—including forcing him to take 10 lashes with a leather belt. In the end, Rhodes got the match he'd wanted, but it was MJF who scored the win.

VOTES FOR OTHERS

30%

Some of the top vote-getters who did not capture a runner-up spot include: The Mysterio Family vs. Seth Rollins, Drew McIntyre vs. Randy Orton, Tessa Blanchard vs. Sami Calihan, and Roman Reigns vs. Jey Uso.



FEUD OF THE YEAR

**BAYLEY vs.
SASHA BANKS**

37%



MOST POPULAR WRESTLER OF THE YEAR

AFTER NOT EVEN making the “Votes for Others” section in this category a year ago, Orange Cassidy takes home the top prize for Most Popular Wrestler in what turned out to be one of our most closely contested awards this year.

To some, Cassidy’s strong showing here may come as a surprise. But, to anyone who has followed him or AEW for the last year, it won’t. Simply put, there is no one quite like Orange Cassidy in wrestling. And this uniqueness, more than anything, gives him an undeniable connection with fans.

As much as people enjoy the aloof, slacker demeanor Cassidy regularly displays, it may not fully be responsible for the uptick in votes he received this year. In 2020, fans got to see different shades of Orange, especially in his bitter feud with Chris Jericho. It turned out that behind the aviator shades was an

articulate and passionate wrestler who wouldn’t take bullying or humiliation as easily as his aggressors might have thought. The New Jersey native showed that when it was time to fight, the hands do come out of the pockets.

At the All Out pay-per-view, Cassidy defeated Jericho in the first ever Mimosa Mayhem Match, which was the rubber match of their extended rivalry. Silly gimmicks aside, that was undoubtedly the biggest victory of his career. Cassidy used that momentum to push Cody Rhodes to the limit (and the time limit) in a TNT championship match on *Dynamite* ... and again in a lumberjack match two weeks later.

While he may not be everyone’s cup of tea, “The King Of Sloth Style” connects with diehards and casuals alike who prefer a technically skilled wrestler with a clever sense of humor.

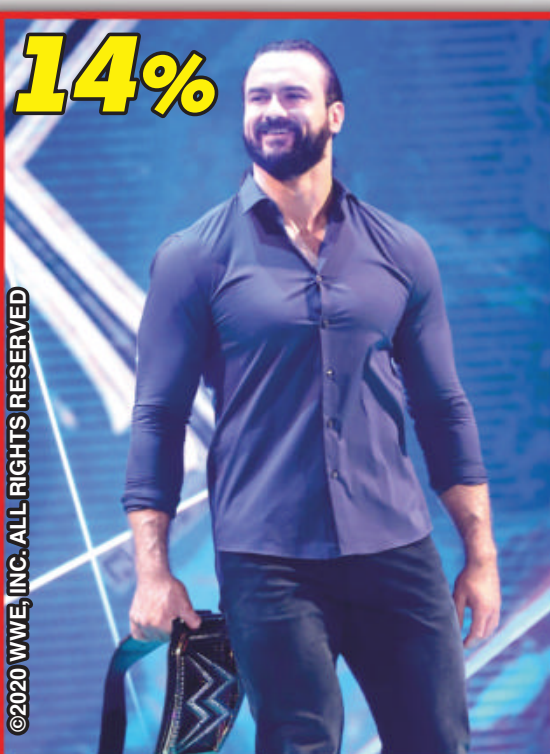
PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH AEW



JON MOXLEY

Jon Moxley has the legitimate blue-collar connection with fans that other wrestlers can only dream about. And though he finishes as the top runner-up in this category for a second year in a row, the votes were very, very close. Moxley had a career year—as highlighted elsewhere in this issue—but he may not have had it without the support of fans, like the ones who blew the roof off the Wintrust Arena in Chicago when he defeated Chris Jericho to end his inaugural AEW World title reign. Fans recognize and appreciate the gritty toughness Mox brings to every fight.

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DREW McINTYRE

It would have been easy for McIntyre to sulk and say that even though he won the WWE championship at WrestleMania, he deserved more. He could have bemoaned the fact that he didn’t have a stadium full of fans to hoist the belt in front of, or get to see the Florida sky filled with fireworks in his honor. That’s not McIntyre’s style, though. Instead, the hardworking Scot simply rolled up his sleeves and got to work being the best champion he could be—giving fans at home someone to believe in ... and believe they did.

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KEITH LEE

With his smile that can light up a room, it’s difficult not to like Keith Lee. The fact that he doesn’t look like the typical sculpted, fitness magazine model only endears him to fans that much more. Make no mistake though; Lee is incredible at what he does. The “Limitless One” steamrolled his way through NXT and picked up the North American championship before going on to end Adam Cole’s epic reign as NXT champion. Pretty soon, the main WWE roster came calling, and Lee got to let *Monday Night Raw*—and a whole new legion of fans—bask in his glory.

33% VOTES FOR OTHERS

Some of the top vote-getters who did not capture a runner-up spot include: Asuka, Adam Cole, Nick Gage, and Chris Jericho.

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**MOST POPULAR WRESTLER
OF THE YEAR**

**ORANGE
CASSIDY**

23%

MOST HATED WRESTLER OF THE YEAR

ONCE UPON A time, it was easy for wrestlers to get fans to hate them, if that was what they desired. Not so much anymore. With the advent of social media, fans can now get access to a wrestler's most personal moments outside of the ring, showing us the likable human beings behind the detestable on-screen personas.

Credit, then, must go to Seth Rollins who, despite all of this, was so reprehensible during his appearances on WWE television that our readers saw fit to crown him as the Most Hated Wrestler. Such wicked work did Rollins do as the "Monday Night Messiah" that it's easy to forget that just two years ago, he was the top runner-up in our Most Popular Wrestler category. A quick examination of his year, though, and the reasons for this make themselves clear.

After running roughshod over most of the Raw roster during the early part of the year, Rollins took his despicable actions to a new level when he began targeting Rey Mysterio and, in turn, the Mysterio family. Here's a shortlist of Rollins' most heinous actions: Trying to blind Rey using the corner of the steel ring steps; beating a helpless Dominik Mysterio repeatedly with kendo-stick shots; being generally threatening towards 19-year-old Aalyah Mysterio.

Even his lead disciple Murphy couldn't stomach the actions of Rollins and broke away from him—but not before being subjected to much mental and physical abuse at the hands of his mentor.

The *PWI* readers have spoken. And, while they may love his wrestling skills, in 2020, they also just loved to hate Seth Rollins.



19%



17%



11%

ROMAN REIGNS

How do you go from being named the most Inspirational Wrestler of the Year in 2019 to being one of the most hated in 2020? It seems like aligning yourself with Paul Heyman is a good place to start. While it may not be fair to put the blame solely on Heyman, he no doubt played a large part in the transformation of Roman Reigns into "The Tribal Chief." But the rest? That's all on Reigns. The treatment of his cousin Jey Uso alone is enough to warrant such a high number of votes in this category.

MJF

Anyone who says that it's not possible to truly hate a wrestler these days has probably never met MJF. Indeed, when *PWI* ran a feature on him in our October issue, we asked our resident wrestling psychologist Dr. Sidney M. Basil to analyze MJF for us—just to see if he really was that bad. His findings? "Maxwell Jacob Friedman is the most antagonistic, contradictory, and frustrating individual I've ever encountered." Quite, Dr. Basil. It seems that a good portion of our readers agree with your analysis. Yet, somehow, we think MJF will be perversely proud of this fact.

RANDY ORTON

There is just something easy to hate about Randy Orton, which may explain why he has been a consistent vote-getter in this category for well over a decade now. In 2020, Orton did plenty to put himself in contention for this award—including carrying out assaults on legends like Ric Flair. But it was his actions towards a former friend that really crossed the line, when "The Viper" set about ruining Edge's feel-good return to WWE. In this war, nothing was off limits for Orton, who went so far as to hit an RKO on Edge's wife, Beth Phoenix.

32% VOTES FOR OTHERS

Some of the top vote-getters who did not capture a runner-up spot include: Bayley, King Corbin, Britt Baker, Brodie Lee, and Rickey Shane Page.



**MOST HATED WRESTLER
OF THE YEAR**

**SETH
ROLLINS**

21%

MATCH OF THE YEAR

WAS THIS THE best tag team match in wrestling history? That may be debatable, but what's not up for debate is that almost a quarter of our total votes for match of the year went to this AEW instant classic from February's Revolution PPV.

Since its inception, AEW has done a superb job of making its tag team division one of the crown-jewel pieces of its product. And, with this championship match, it was easy to see why as the Elite members tore into each other for thirty straight minutes and, in the process, dispelled any notion that modern tag team wrestling can't tell a compelling story.

The match weaved many elements into it: Matt Jackson's injured back; Omega's less-than-100% shoulder; Page's blatant disrespect toward the Bucks

and Omega's attempt not to do the same while still trying to defeat them at all costs. This was a thrilling contest filled with high impact moves and many near-falls that never once felt like overkill.

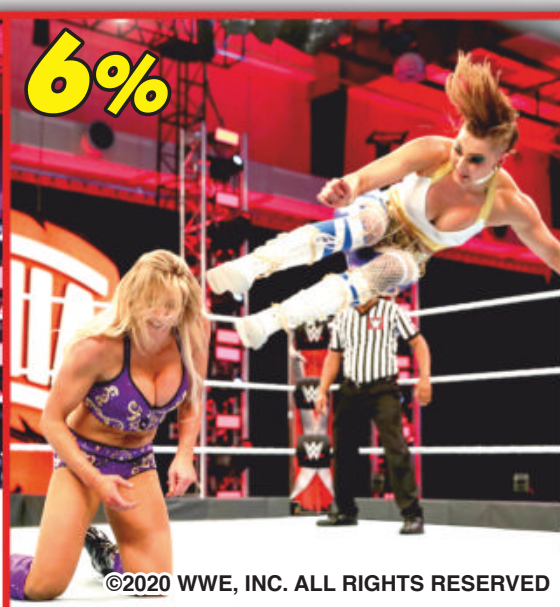
In the end, a Buckshot Lariat from Adam Page on Matt Jackson finally put the Bucks away, and Page and Omega retained their title belts. In a post-match show of respect, "Hangman" held the ropes open for his partner to exit, negating any chance of the suspected turn that seemed likely in the lead-up. The Young Bucks, however were not granted any such respect from Page ... although one has to imagine that someday, these four men will be able to look back on this match and have a ton of respect for the others involved in it. Our readers certainly do.

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EDGE vs. RANDY ORTON (6/14)

Ambitiously dubbed "The Greatest Wrestling Match Ever" before they had even locked up, Edge and Orton didn't let impossible expectations hinder them, and the two ended up putting on what was certainly the greatest wrestling match in WWE in quite some time. The near 45-minute battle had almost everything one could want in a wrestling match, including big moves (both theirs and other people's), drama, and a bitter, personal agenda. Ultimately, it was the opportunistic Orton who caught Edge with a low-blow and finished him off with a punt to the head for the win.



CHARLOTTE FLAIR vs. RHEA RIPLEY (3/25)

It can be easy, given the magnitude of WrestleMania, for a match to get lost in the shuffle. Even more so when that Wrestlemania is a two-night event. The fact that our readers not only remembered this match well but enjoyed it enough to place it so highly on our list speaks volumes about what Charlotte Flair and Rhea Ripley did in their battle for the NXT Women's championship. "The Queen" and "The Nightmare" traded hard-hitting blows for 20 minutes in a back-and-forth match before Ripley, unable to stand the pain in her knee any longer, finally gave in to Flair's Figure-Eight leglock.



WALTER vs. ILJA DRAGUNOV (10/29)

If familiarity breeds contempt, that explains why WALTER and Dragunov wrestle like they deeply hate one another. Having clashed multiple times already all over the world, the two men gave NXT U.K. its first proper taste of their rivalry in October. And they did not disappoint! From the opening bell, both grapplers went after each other with an array of slaps, suplexes, and stiff, stiff shots that left both bruised and bloody. After 25 minutes of non-stop action, WALTER took advantage of the weakened Dragunov and slapped on a rear naked choke that the Russian could not escape from—taking the match to remain NXT U.K. champion.

53%

VOTES FOR OTHERS

Some of the top vote-getters that did not capture a runner-up spot include: Roman Reigns vs. Jey Uso (10/25), Best Friends vs. Santana & Ortiz (09/16), Sasha Banks vs. Bayley (10/25), and Tessa Blanchard vs. Sami Callihan (1/12).

MATCH OF THE YEAR

**THE YOUNG BUCKS
vs. ADAM PAGE &
KENNY OMEGA (2/29)**

22%

TAG TEAM OF THE YEAR

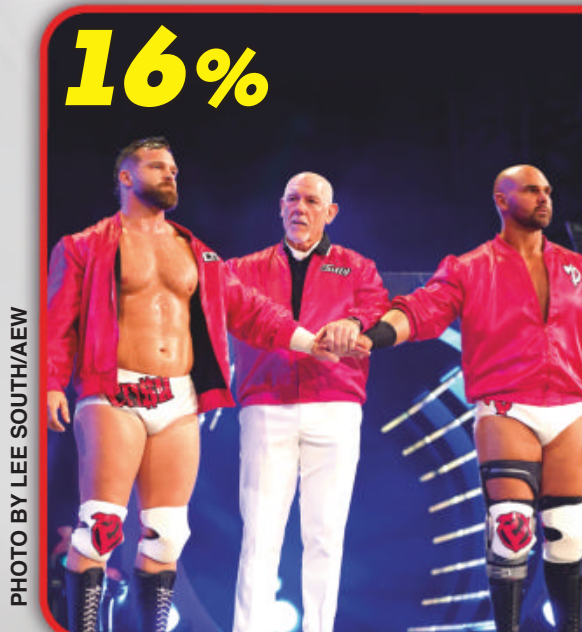
FOR THE FIRST time in the history of this publication, our readers have selected a pair of women to take home the awards for Feud of the Year and Tag Team of the Year. This incredible feat proves just how good Bayley and Sasha Banks were in 2020—be it together or apart—and underscores their strong placing in our “Women’s 100” ranking and our inaugural “Tag Team 50” list.

After beating Alexa Bliss and Nikki Cross to become the WWE Women’s tag team champs in May, Smackdown’s Bayley and Banks took their gold to all three WWE brands and defeated anyone who stepped up to them, including Shotzi Blackheart & Tegan Nox on *NXT* and The Iiconics and Kabuki Warriors on *Raw*. While tension may have simmered under the surface, indicated by Bayley’s lack of

interest in helping Banks win singles matches the way Banks did for her, there was no denying that when working as a team, the Golden Role Models were special.

Carrying themselves like superstars everywhere they went and collecting as much gold as they could carry, the argument could be made that “Two-Belts Banks” and “Bayley Dos Straps” were the best thing on WWE programming at various points throughout the year. Many of our readers seemed to think so!

For now, the Golden Role Models are no more, having lost their tag belts (and their friendship) thanks to Bayley’s vicious backstabbing. But don’t be surprised if, when their singles feud is finally finished and cooler heads prevail, the Role Models ride again someday. They might just be too good not to.



FTR

FTR could very well mean “For The Redemption.” Because, when they arrived in AEW, that’s exactly what Dax Harwood and Cash Wheeler seemed set on. Feeling slighted by their treatment in WWE, the former Revival men arrived in All Elite Wrestling to great fanfare and set about carving their way through the tag team scene there. Victories over the Lucha Bros., Jurassic Express, and Best Friends were just some of the highlights the Tully Blanchard-managed duo put together before they dethroned Kenny Omega and Adam Page for the AEW World tag team title at All Out.



ADAM PAGE & KENNY OMEGA

While fans patiently waited for the Page and Omega partnership to implode at any moment, the former Elite members managed to keep things together long enough to record a near nine-month reign as AEW World tag team champions. Together, the duo defeated a veritable who’s who of the AEW tag division, including Dark Order, SCU, and The Young Bucks. This success, however, seemed to do little to ease the tension in their relationship (or curb “Hangman’s” drinking). When they eventually lost the titles to FTR, the inevitable split occurred. But the run they had until then was very impressive.

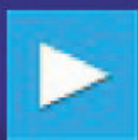


STREET PROFITS

Montez Ford and Angelo Dawkins spent the majority of 2020 as the *Raw* tag team champions, and scored victories over teams like Seth Rollins & Murphy and Andrade & Angel Garza. Another highlight was their feud and subsequent friendship with the Viking Raiders, yielding a wide range of competitions both in and out of the ring. The Profits didn’t technically lose the *Raw* tag team straps when they were drafted to Smackdown in the fall, but rather conveniently just traded them for the New Day’s Smackdown tag belts. At Survivor Series, the pair beat the New Day in a highly rated bout.

37% VOTES FOR OTHERS

Some of the top vote-getters who did not capture a runner-up spot include: Jay Lethal & Jonathan Gresham, New Day, The North, and The Young Bucks.



TAG TEAM OF THE YEAR

**GOLDEN ROLE
MODELS (BAYLEY &
SASHA BANKS)**

20%



WRESTLER OF THE YEAR

PROOF THAT LANDING the number one spot on the *PWI* “500” wasn’t a misstep by our staff—the readers have spoken ... and agreed that no one in wrestling had a better year than Jon Moxley.

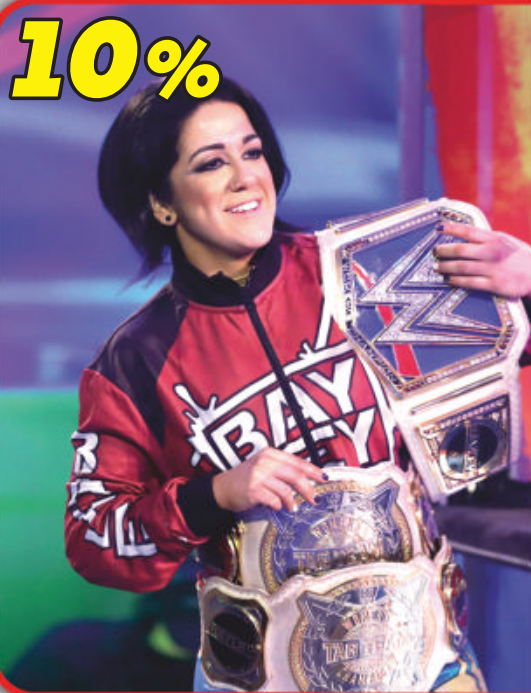
Heralded as a major player from the moment he arrived in AEW, Mox began the year by besting PAC to earn himself a shot at Chris Jericho’s AEW World championship before heading to Japan to successfully defend his IWGP Intercontinental title against Minoru Suzuki.

At AEW’s Revolution PPV on February 29, Moxley downed Jericho to lift the AEW World championship and set about establishing himself as the most fighting champion in the business. A quick look at the names Moxley defeated in 2020 reads like a who’s who of AEW players: Jake Hager, Brodie Lee, Brian Cage,

Darby Allin, MJF, and Eddie Kingston, among others. None of these victories came easily, and every one of them was fought with the trademark heart and passion that the former Dean Ambrose is famous for.

If Moxley’s intention upon leaving WWE was to remove memories of who he had been and show the world who he really is, then mission accomplished. Because the heights he reached in AEW surpassed any he had previously known. For almost the full calendar year, he was the standard-bearer for the company.

Losing the AEW World title to Kenny Omega late in the polling period still didn’t put the majority of our readers off voting for Moxley—nor should it have. Not one of our runners-up had even half of the percentage of votes that he received, which is a testament to the truly impressive year that Jon Moxley had.



10%



8%



7%

BAYLEY

To anyone who was concerned that removing our Woman of the Year category would result in women not being recognized in this one, we give you your highest polling runner-up for Wrestler of the Year: Bayley. In 2020, our readers felt that no woman (or man, besides Jon Moxley) made the impact that Bayley did. Consistently one of the best parts of WWE television, she entered the year as Smackdown Women’s champion and went on to hold it for a record-setting 380 days, easily claiming the top spot in our annual “Women’s 100” in the process.

CHRIS JERICHO

The chameleon-like Jericho continues to reinvent himself 30+ years into a successful career. While 2020 didn’t see him achieve the same success as he did in 2019, most wrestlers would be only too happy to replicate the year “The Demo God” had. Even after losing the AEW World championship in February, Jericho refused to take a back seat and instead refocused his energy. He continued showing his versatility in everything from a no-DQ Stadium Stampede outing alongside his Inner Circle teammates to a Mimosa Mayhem Match against Orange Cassidy ... even creating a memorable song and dance number in a restaurant with MJF.

SASHA BANKS

A rebound year for “The Boss” saw her reclaim the WWE Women’s tag team championship with longtime ally Bayley for what proved to be their most successful period together yet. At NXT’s Great American Bash event, Banks came close to defeating Io Shirai for the NXT Women’s title. She also traded the Raw Women’s strap with Asuka in July and August. A redemptive victory over her former best friend at Hell in a Cell ended Bayley’s historic Smackdown Women’s title reign and helped Sasha round out the year as champion of the blue brand.

46% VOTES FOR OTHERS

Some of the top vote-getters who did not capture a runner-up spot include: Drew McIntyre, Cody Rhodes, Asuka, Randy Orton, and Adam Cole.



PRO **wrestling**
ILLUSTRATED

WRESTLER OF THE YEAR

**JON
MOXLEY**

29%

MADUSA MICELI

IN THE PROCESS of putting together this section, we confided in longtime *PWI* cornerstone Bill Apter that we would be honoring Madusa Miceli with this year's Stanley Weston Award for Lifetime Achievement. His response? "It's about time."

Indeed, Miceli—known to fans as both Madusa and, in WWE, as Alundra Blayze—has left a significant mark on the wrestling industry, while helping to pave the way for generations of women wrestlers to thrive.

Raised in the Minneapolis foster system, Miceli's career began, appropriately enough, in Minnesota's AWA. It was there she began to establish a name for herself ... and earned the distinction of being named *PWI*'s first-ever female Rookie of the Year (1988). Now, more than three decades later, she's received our magazine's most coveted award.

"Is this a rib?" Miceli asked, as she unwrapped her plaque, buried in a box beneath a heap of packing peanuts. "The last time I received one of these, I was the first ever to receive one as a woman."

Indeed, she's long been a pioneer—her unforgettable bouts with Bull Nakano (some of the very best WWF matches of the era); her jaw-dropping debut on *Nitro* (where she tossed the WWF Women's title belt in a garbage can); the fact that she was the first woman to capture WCW's World cruiserweight championship. Years before Bea Priestley and Jamie Hayter took Stardom by storm, Miceli made a splash as a *joshi* superstar. Even today, she remains a major influence on wrestlers worldwide.

"I have been fortunate enough to get to learn from her, and she has so much knowledge to pass along," said Kimber Lee, current Impact star and SHIMMER

champion. "I will never forget when I was feeling really down on myself after being released from WWE, she reached out to me and reminded me that I am still a badass, and that when one door closes, it isn't the end."

From the very beginning, Miceli has walked through door after door, capturing major titles in WWE, WCW, and Japan. Then, when her days as an active competitor were over, she became a champion driver in the world of monster trucks—piloting an enormous vehicle bearing her *nom de guerre*.

Miceli memorably competed in the battle royal at WWE's historic Evolution event, marking a return to the ring after 18 years of retirement. Though she hasn't competed in the ring since then, she's kept one foot firmly in the wrestling business over the last half-decade. In 2015, she became the onscreen authority figure of World Wonder Ring Stardom. This was a clear acknowledgement of her influential work in All Japan Women's Pro-Wrestling, where she was a two-time champion.

In 2019, she briefly held WWE's 24/7 championship (very briefly). And, in August 2020, she hosted AEW's Women's Tag Team Cup tournament, lending an air of prestige and lineage to the company's first proper tournament for its women's division.

"Madusa is an incredible trailblazer for women in the professional wrestling industry," said AEW's Chief Brand Officer Brandi Rhodes. "Her contin-

ued passion and support for the industry continues to inspire female wrestlers today."

Despite her many contributions, Madusa Miceli was humbled to be chosen for this award. "I am very grateful and honored," she told *PWI*. "Thank you so much."



STU SAKS

FOR MOST READERS, Stu Saks receiving the Stanley Weston Award will make perfect sense. But, for Stu himself, the recognition was a total surprise.

“When you give the award to a wrestler, they’ll say, ‘I’m honored to have my name on a list of all these greats who have received this award in the past,’” he said. “And I can say that, too. But I have the added pleasure of having my name on an award that’s named for Stanley Weston, who was the founder of the magazine and my boss for all those years. It’s really an honor.”

From 1979 until June 2020, Stu Saks was an indispensable part of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* and its former sister publications, serving as a writer, photographer, editor, and, ultimately, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief. As Senior Writer Al Castle told John Corrigan of *The Wrestling Estate*, “[Bill] Apter was the face of *PWI*, but Stu has been the heart, brain, and muscle for 40 years.”

Corrigan’s June 1 article, “Stu Saks Says Goodbye To *PWI*,” is a moving retrospective of Saks’ career that’s well worth seeking out. But, since Stu has already told his story—including in his farewell column—our conversation with him focused more on his well-earned, post-*PWI* respite. As it turns out, he’s kept quite busy.

“Since I retired in the summer, there’s always things to do,” Saks said. “We have a decent-sized property, so there’s always work to be done around the house. Although, there are limits to what you can do as you’re getting a little bit older. But, if you spread it out over the course of the week, it’s very doable.”

But it hasn’t been all work and no play. “I joined a softball league for men 60 years and over,” he said,

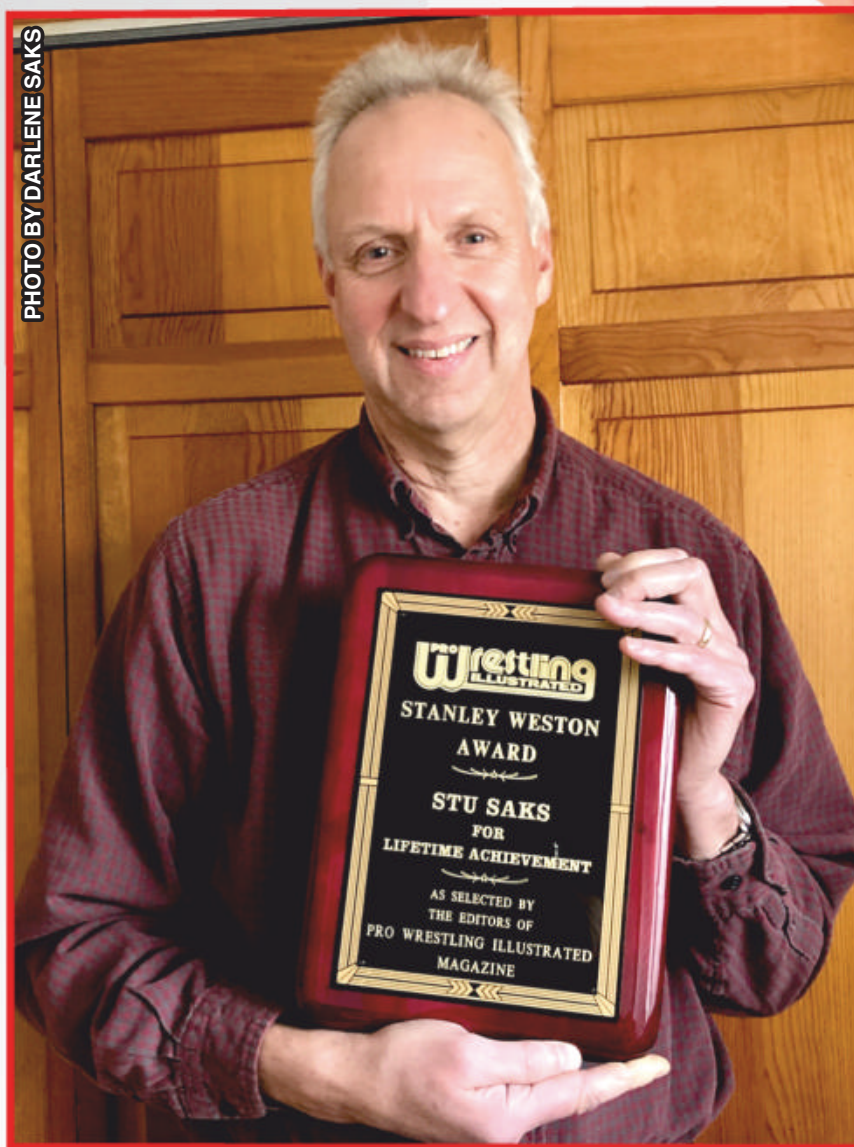


PHOTO BY DARLENE SAKS

adding that the league had copious precautions in place due to the pandemic. “I think we played about 25 games, and they had not one case of COVID throughout the whole league.”

Though he played multiple positions, Saks was often placed at first base, where his impressive height helped him field even the wildest of throws. “I had a ball,” he said. “I met a lot of good people, and we had a lot of fun.”

Saks has also begun work as a volunteer with the local fire police, helping with traffic control to keep firefighters safe and equipment protected. “I’m learning. I haven’t been doing it

long enough to be out on my own yet,” he admitted. “It’s kind of funny. After doing wrestling and boxing magazines for 40 years, I’m the rookie in the softball league and the fire department. I’m the new kid on the block. I went from being the old, slow guy in my old softball league, where we played with young guys, to being the young, fast guy.”

Since retiring, Saks admits he’s cut down on his weekly wrestling viewing—though he’s sure he’ll come back around before too long—but he hasn’t stopped keeping up with *PWI*. “I’m a subscriber, like everybody should be,” he said. “I read the magazines cover to cover, and I haven’t found a typo yet.”

“I love the fact that, having walked away, I can pick up *PWI*, and it looks as good or better than when I was there.”

Of course, without Stu Saks, there wouldn’t be a *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* for us to produce ... and the wrestling landscape would be much less colorful without his contributions. Stu, since we know you’re reading this: Congratulations. You’ve earned this plaque ten times over.

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01.04.20: HIROMU TAKAHASHI CELEBRATES WITH THE IWGP JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT TITLE AFTER DETHRONING WILL OSPREAY ON NIGHT ONE OF WRESTLE KINGDOM 14.



01.04.20: THOUGH UNDERDOGS AGAINST THE GUERRILLAS OF DESTINY, DAVID FINLAY AND JUICE ROBINSON EMERGED VICTORIOUS IN THEIR IWGP TAG TITLE BOUT AT WRESTLE KINGDOM.



01.04.20: JON MOXLEY PUTS THE HURT ON LANCE ARCHER EN ROUTE TO REGAINING THE IWGP U.S. TITLE.

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AAA TITLE CHANGES

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
Cruiserweight	Laredo Kid ¹	—	—
World Tag Team	Fenix & Pentagon Jr. ²	—	—
World Trios	El Hijo del Vikingo, Golden Magic, & Myzteziz Jr. ³	—	—
Reina de Reinas	Taya Valkyrie ⁴	—	—
Mega	Kenny Omega ⁵	—	—

¹Title held since February 16, 2019

²Title held since June 16, 2019

³Title held since August 3, 2019

⁴Title held since September 15, 2019

⁵Title held since October 19, 2019

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01.04.20: TETSUYA NAITO CLEARLY HAD JAY WHITE SCOUTED, HANDILY DEFEATING THE NEW ZEALAND NATIVE FOR THE IWGP INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMPIONSHIP.



01.05.20: THE IWGP WORLD TITLE CONTEST BETWEEN NAITO AND KAZUCHIKA OKADA WAS ONE FOR THE AGES. ULTIMATELY, IT WAS NAITO WHO WOULD COME OUT ON TOP.

ALL ELITE WRESTLING

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
World Tag Team	Kenny Omega & Adam Page	Frankie Kazarian & Scorpio Sky	01.21.20
World Women's	Nyla Rose	Riho	02.12.20
World Heavyweight	Jon Moxley	Chris Jericho	02.29.20
TNT	Cody Rhodes ¹	—	05.23.20
World Women's	Hikaru Shida	Nyla Rose	05.23.20
FTW ²	Brian Cage	—	07.02.20
TNT	Brodie Lee	Cody Rhodes	08.13.20
World Tag Team	Cash Wheeler & Dax Harwood	Kenny Omega & Adam Page	09.05.20
TNT	Cody Rhodes	Brodie Lee	10.07.20
TNT	Darby Allin	Cody Rhodes	11.07.20
World Tag Team	Matt & Nick Jackson	Cash Wheeler & Dax Harwood	11.07.20
World Heavyweight	Kenny Omega	Jon Moxley	12.02.20

¹Beat Lance Archer in the finals of a tournament to crown the first champion

²Awarded to Brian Cage by Taz

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING



01.12.20: A BATTLE-WORN TESSA BLANCHARD HOLDS THE IMPACT HEAVY-WEIGHT TITLE, WHICH SHE'D JUST WON FROM SAMI CALLIHAN.

01.22.20: A DOMINANT KEITH LEE ENSURED THAT RODERICK STRONG'S NORTH AMERICAN TITLE REIGN ENDED WITH A WHIMPER.



PHOTO BY IMPACT WRESTLING

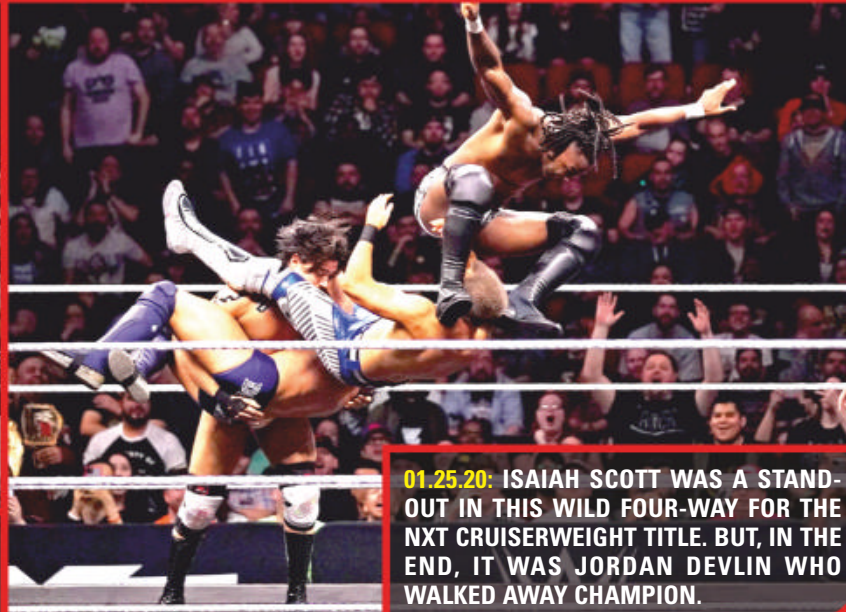


01.18.20: IN A MATCH THAT WOULDN'T AIR UNTIL FEBRUARY, JORDYNNE GRACE BESTS TAYA VALKYRIE FOR THE KNOCKOUTS TITLE—BEGINNING A SIX-MONTH REIGN AS CHAMP.

PHOTO BY WILL BYINGTON/AEW



01.21.20: THE MAKESHIFT TEAM OF KENNY OMEGA AND ADAM PAGE UPSET AEW WORLD TAG CHAMPS SCORPIO SKY AND FRANKIE KAZARIAN ON THE JERICHO CRUISE.



01.25.20: ISAIAH SCOTT WAS A STAND-OUT IN THIS WILD FOUR-WAY FOR THE NXT CRUISERWEIGHT TITLE. BUT, IN THE END, IT WAS JORDAN DEVLIN WHO WALKED AWAY CHAMPION.

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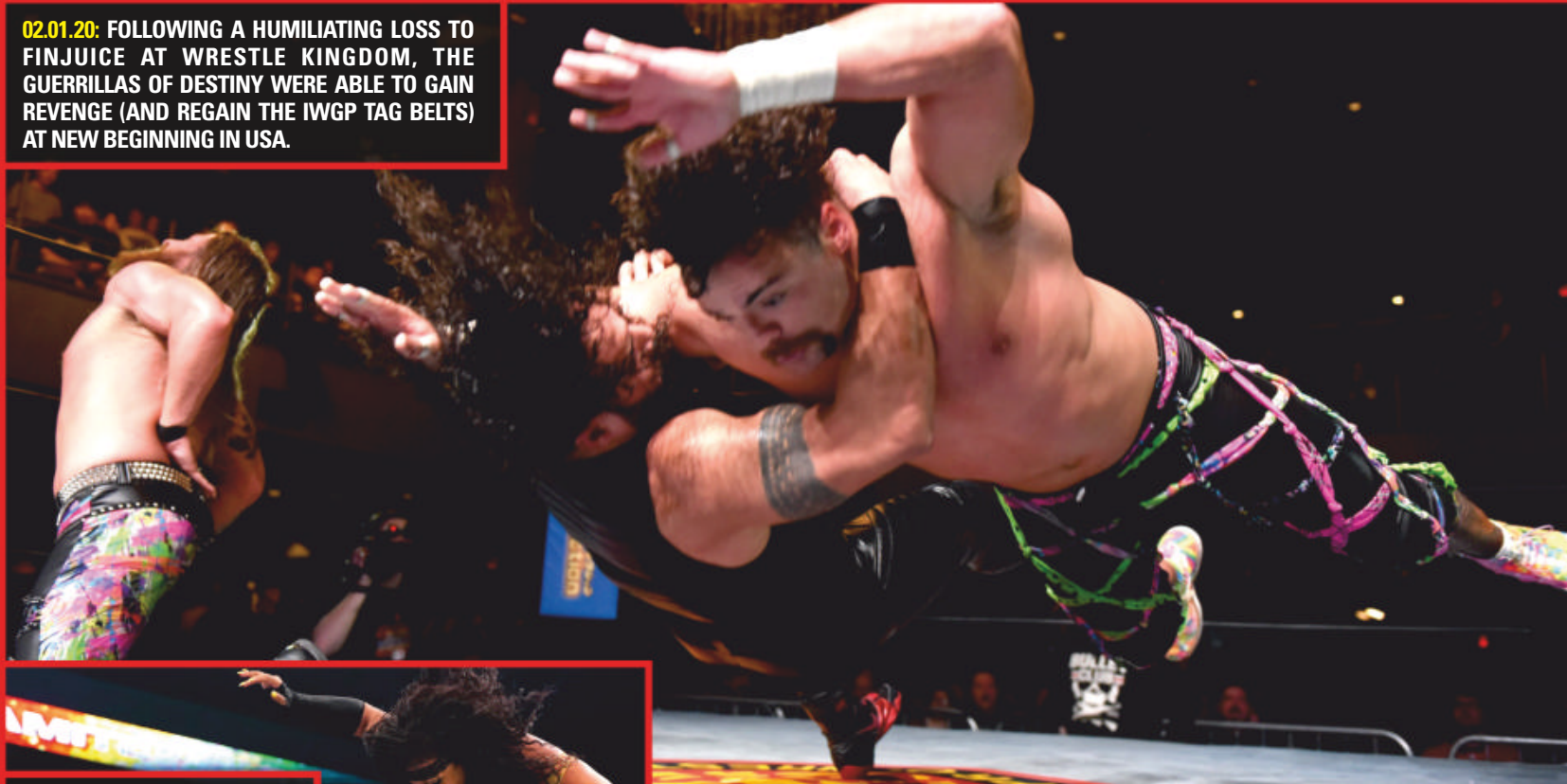
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01.20.20: SETH ROLLINS AND HIS "DISCIPLE" MURPHY WHIP VIKING RAIDER ERIK ACROSS THE RING IN THE MATCH WHERE THEY WOULD TAKE HOME THE RAW TAG BELTS.



01.31.20: AFTER DECIMATING INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMP SHINSUKE NAKAMURA, BRAUN STROWMAN GOT HIS FIRST TASTE OF SINGLES GOLD.



02.01.20: FOLLOWING A HUMILIATING LOSS TO FINJUICE AT WRESTLE KINGDOM, THE GUERRILLAS OF DESTINY WERE ABLE TO GAIN REVENGE (AND REGAIN THE IWGP TAG BELTS) AT NEW BEGINNING IN USA.



02.12.20: NYLA ROSE CLOBBERS RIHO WITH A FLYING KNEEDROP FROM THE TOP ROPE. MINUTES LATER, ROSE WAS CELEBRATING AS NEW AEW WOMEN'S CHAMPION.



02.16.20: MERE WEEKS BEFORE COVID SEPARATED THE TEAM FOR GOOD, THE BROSERWEIGHTS CAPTURED THE NXT TAG TEAM CHAMPIONSHIP.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

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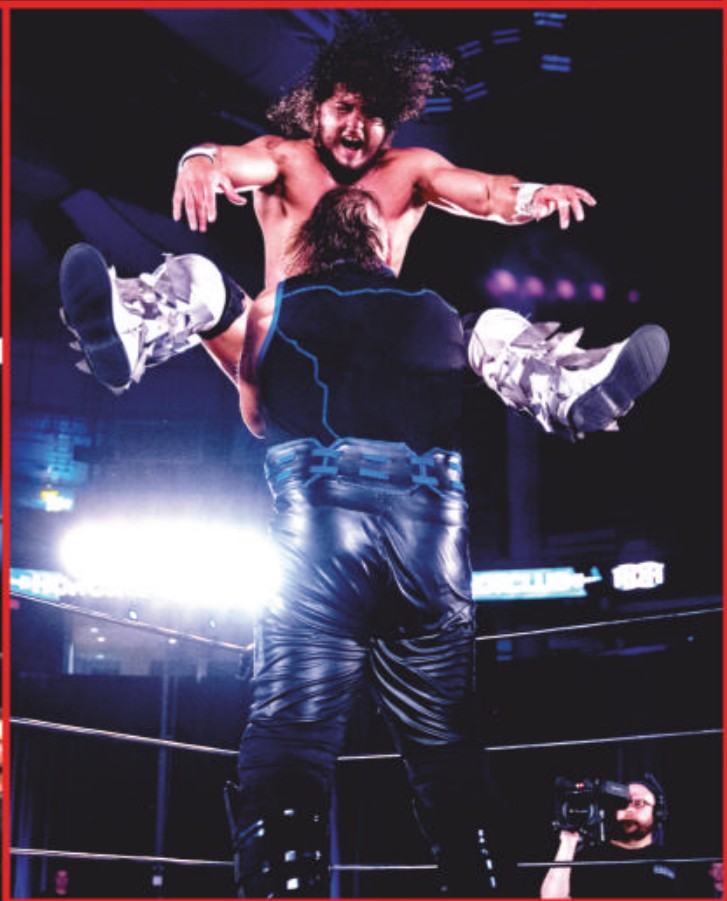
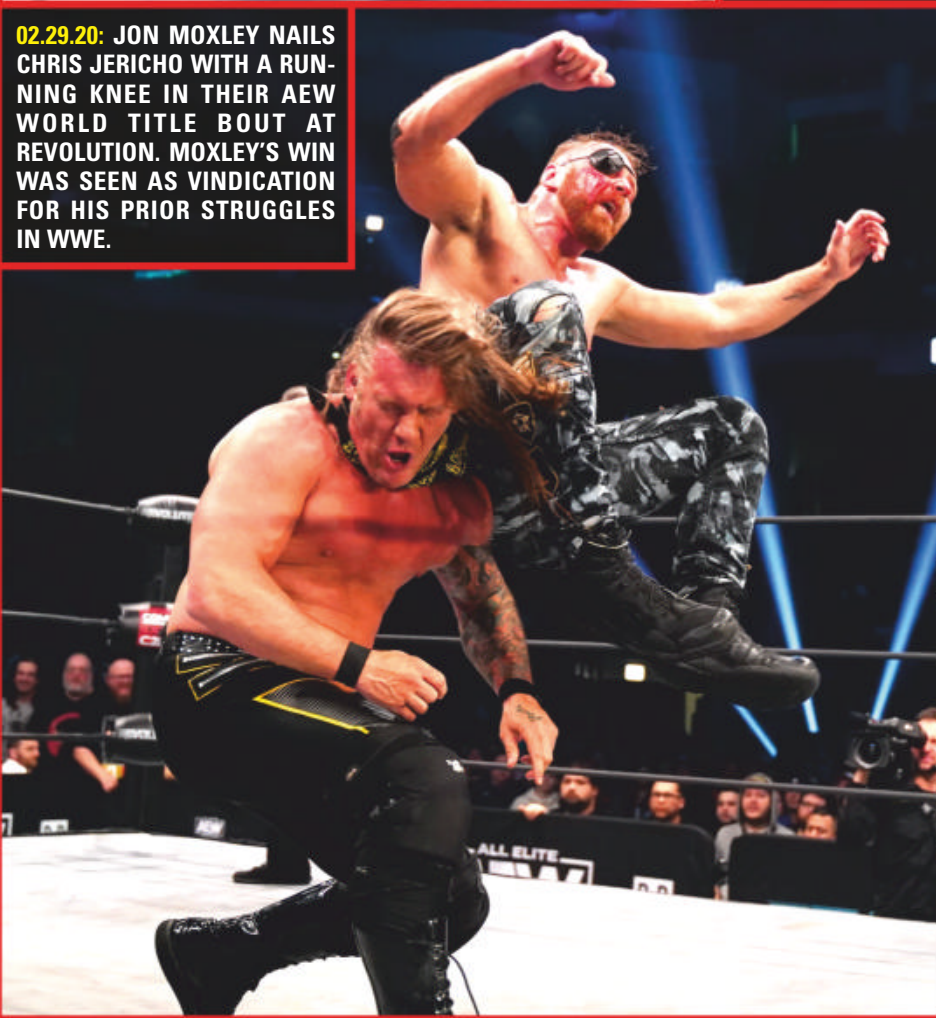
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02.20.20: DESPITE BEING A LESS EXPERIENCED TEAM, HIROSHI TANAHASHI AND KOTA IBUSHI WERE ABLE TO DEFEAT GUERRILLAS OF DESTINY FOR THE IWGP TAG BELTS.



02.27.20: THE MIZ HITS BIG E WITH THE SKULL CRUSHING FINALE IN THE MATCH WHERE HE AND LONGTIME PARTNER JOHN MORRISON ONCE AGAIN BECAME TAG CHAMPS—THIS TIME, FOR THE SMACKDOWN BRAND.

02.29.20: JON MOXLEY NAILS CHRIS JERICHO WITH A RUNNING KNEE IN THEIR AEW WORLD TITLE BOUT AT REVOLUTION. MOXLEY'S WIN WAS SEEN AS VINDICATION FOR HIS PRIOR STRUGGLES IN WWE.



02.29.20: DEFENDING CHAMP PCO TRIES A POWERBOMB ON RUSH, WHO WAS ULTIMATELY ABLE TO DEFEAT HIS RIVAL AND BEGIN HIS SECOND RUN AS ROH HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION.

ALL JAPAN PRO WRESTLING TITLE CHANGES

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
Tag Team	Suwama & Shuji Ishikawa	Ryoji Sai & Zeus	01.02.20
Junior Heavyweight	Susumu Yokosuka ¹	Hikaru Sato	01.03.20
Triple Crown	Suwama	Kento Miyahara	03.23.20
Junior Heavyweight	Koji Iwamoto	Susumu Yokosuka	07.25.20

¹Won the vacant title

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03.02.20: THE STREET PROFITS AVOIDED THE “MAIN ROSTER CURSE” THAT HAS PLAGUED SO MANY NXT TEAMS, BEGINNING THEIR IMPRESSIVE RUN AS RAW TAG CHAMPS WITH A WIN OVER SETH ROLLINS AND MURPHY.



03.08.20: MAKING FULL USE OF A TWO-MAN ADVANTAGE, SAMI ZAYN TOOK OUT BRAUN STROWMAN AT THE ELIMINATION CHAMBER EVENT IN PHILLY—ESCAPING WITH THE INTERCONTINENTAL TITLE BELT IN HIS GRASP.

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CMLL TITLE CHANGES

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
Light Heavyweight	Niebla Roja Jr. ¹	—	—
Trios	Euforia, Gran Guerrero & Ultimo Guerrero ²	—	—
Heavyweight	Ultimo Guerrero ³	—	—
Tag Team	Caristico & Mistico ⁴	—	—
Women	Princesa Sugehit	Marcela	10.23.20

¹Title held since June 10, 2017
²Title held since September 28, 2018
³Title held since October 16, 2018
⁴Title held since November 1, 2019



03.25.20: ON NIGHT ONE OF WRESTLEMANIA 36, ALEXA BLISS AND NIKKI CROSS OVERTOOK WOMEN'S TAG CHAMPS KABUKI WARRIORS TO BECOME THE FIRST CHAMPIONS CROWNED BY WWE DURING THE COVID-19 SHUTDOWN.



03.25.20: CHARLOTTE FLAIR CELEBRATES HER SECOND NXT WOMEN'S CHAMPIONSHIP WIN AS FORMER CHAMP RHEA RIPLEY LIES DEFEATED ON THE CANVAS.



03.25.20: BROCK LESNAR EATS ONE OF SEVERAL CLAYMORE KICKS FROM DREW MCINTYRE, WHO WOULD EASILY UNSEAT HIM TO BECOME WWE WORLD CHAMPION.



03.25.20: A LAST MINUTE SUBSTITUTION FOR ROMAN REIGNS, BRAUN STROWMAN MADE EASY WORK OF UNIVERSAL CHAMPION GOLDBERG AT WRESTLEMANIA.

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04.17.20: BIG E IS ALL SMILES AFTER SINGLE-HANDEDLY RECLAIMING THE SMACKDOWN TAG TITLE IN A TRIPLE-THREAT MATCH.



05.10.20: WITH BECKY LYNCH TAKING LEAVE TO START A FAMILY, MONEY IN THE BANK WINNER ASUKA BECAME THE DE FACTO RAW WOMEN'S CHAMPION.



04.18.20: WILLIE MACK AND ACE AUSTIN SEEMED TO HAVE STUDIED EACH OTHER WELL, COUNTERING EACH OTHER'S OFFENSE WITH EASE. ULTIMATELY, MACK BEAT THE NEW JERSEY NATIVE TO BECOME X DIVISION CHAMPION.



05.13.20: MARCEL BARTHEL AND FABIAN AICHNER WERE UNABLE TO COLLECT ANY GOLD IN NXT U.K., BUT THEIR FORTUNES PROVED BETTER IN THE STATES.

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PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

05.23.20: HIKARU SHIDA CONNECTS WITH A MODIFIED SHINING WIZARD ON NYLA ROSE, WHOM SHE THEN PINNED TO CAPTURE THE AEW WOMEN'S TITLE.



05.23.20: AFTER PROMISING TO NEVER AGAIN CHALLENGE FOR THE AEW WORLD TITLE, CODY RHODES HOLDS THE NEW TNT CHAMPIONSHIP BELT.

DRAGON GATE TITLE CHANGES

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
Open The Twin Gate	BxB Hulk & KAZMA SAKAMOTO ¹	—	01.15.20
Open The Triangle Gate	Ben-K, Dragon Dia, & Strong Machine J	Dragon Kid, Kenichiro Arai, & Ryo Saito	02.29.20
Open The Twin Gate	Jason Lee & Kota Minoura	BxB Hulk & KAZMA SAKAMOTO	08.02.20
Open The Dream Gate	Eita	Naruki Doi	08.02.20
Open The Triangle Gate	KAZMA SAKAMOTO, Kento Kobune, & Takashi Yoshida ²	Kento Miyahara	11.03.20
Open The Brave Gate	Keisuke Okuda	Kaito Ishida	11.03.20
Open The Twin Gate	BxB Hulk & KAI ³	—	11.15.20
Open The Dream Gate	Shun Skywalker	Eita	11.15.20

¹Beat Ben-K & YAMAMOTO in the finals of a tournament to fill the vacant title
²Beat Naruki Doi, Punch Tominaga, & Ryotsu Shimizu to win the vacant title
³Beat Kota Minoura & YAMATO to win the vacant title

05.27.20: THEN PERFORMING UNDER A MASK AS EL HIJO DEL FANTASMA, SANTOS ESCOBAR BEAT UNDERDOG DRAKE MAVERICK IN THE FINALS OF A TOURNAMENT TO CROWN A NEW NXT CRUISERWEIGHT CHAMPION.



06.05.20: "BAYLEY DOS STRAPS" GLOATS AFTER SHE AND SASHA BANKS SUCCESSFULLY CAPTURE THE WWE WOMEN'S TAG TEAM CHAMPIONSHIP.



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IMPACT WRESTLING TITLE CHANGES

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
Heavyweight	Tessa Blanchard	Sami Callihan	01.12.20
Knockouts	Jordynne Grace	Taya Valkyrie	01.18.20
Knockouts	Deonna Purrazzo	Jordynne Grace	07.18.20
Heavyweight	Eddie Edwards ¹	—	07.18.20
Tag Team	Alex Shelley & Chris Sabin	Ethan Page & Josh Alexander	07.19.20
Heavyweight	Eric Young	Eddie Edwards	09.01.20
Tag Team ²	Ethan Page & Josh Alexander	Alex Shelley & Chris Sabin	10.24.20
Knockouts	Su Yung	Deonna Purrazzo	10.24.20
Heavyweight	Rich Swann	Eric Young	10.24.20
Tag Team	Doc Gallows & Karl Anderson	Ethan Page & Josh Alexander	11.14.20
Knockouts	Deonna Purrazzo	Su Yung	11.14.20

¹Defeated Ace Austin, Eric Young, Rich Swann, & Trey in a five-way for the vacant title
²Four-way included Ace Austin & Madman Fulton and Doc Gallows & Karl Anderson

YEAR IN REVIEW

06.07.20: THE DAREDEVIL IO SHIRAI WANTED THE NXT WOMEN'S TITLE JUST A LITTLE MORE THAN HER OPPONENTS, CHARLOTTE FLAIR AND RHEA RIPLEY.



06.08.20: WITH SAMI ZAYN ELECTING TO STAY HOME DUE TO THE SPREAD OF COVID-19, A TOURNAMENT WAS HELD TO CROWN A NEW INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMP. AJ STYLES CLAIMED THE GOLD AFTER BESTING DANIEL BRYAN IN THE TOURNEY FINAL.



07.12.20: ZACK SABRE JR. AND TAICHI (LATER DUBBED "DANGEROUS TEKKERS") OUTMANEUVERED GOLDEN ACE (IBUSHI & TANAHASHI), DETHRONING THE TEAM IN ITS FIRST DEFENSE OF THE IWGP TAG BELTS.



07.01.20: IN A WINNER-TAKES-ALL MATCH, NORTH AMERICAN CHAMPION KEITH LEE ENDED THE YEAR-PLUS REIGN OF NXT HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION ADAM COLE.



07.12.20: IN WHAT WAS CONSIDERED A HUGE UPSET, THE DASTARDLY EVIL BRUTALIZED TETSUYA NAITO AND CAPTURED NEW JAPAN'S COVETED "DOUBLE CHAMPIONSHIP."



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07.18.20: IT WAS GOING TO TAKE A SPECIAL COMPETITOR TO USURP THE X DIVISION TITLE FROM WILLIE MACK. AT SLAMMIVERSARY, CHRIS BEY PROVED HE WAS UP TO THE TASK.

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING



07.18.20: DEONNA PURRAZZO APPLIES HER PAINFUL VENUS DE MILO HOLD ON JORDYNNE GRACE, EARNING THE SUBMISSION VICTORY AND ENDING GRACE'S SIX-MONTH REIGN AS KNOCKOUTS CHAMPION.

MAJOR LEAGUE WRESTLING

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
National Openweight	Alexander Hammerstone ¹	—	—
Heavyweight	Jacob Fatu ²	—	—
Tag Team	Marshall & Ross Von Erich ³	—	—
Middleweight	Myron Reed ⁴	—	—

¹Title held since June 1, 2019

²Title held since July 6, 2019

³Title held since November 2, 2019

⁴Title held since November 9, 2019

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING



PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING

07.19.20: AT THE IMPACT WRESTLING TAPINGS, CHRIS SABIN AND ALEX SHELLEY SET THEIR SIGHTS ON THE NORTH. SABIN AND SHELLEY WOULD WIN THE MATCH, BRINGING THEIR OPPONENTS' EPIC TAG TITLE REIGN TO AN END.

07.18.20: A RUTHLESS ERIC YOUNG DECIMATES TREY MIGUEL WITH A PILEDRIIVER. YOUNG WOULD ELIMINATE MIGUEL IN A HOTLY CONTESTED FIVE-MAN BOUT FOR THE VACANT IMPACT TITLE, WHICH WAS ULTIMATELY WON BY EDDIE EDWARDS.

NEW JAPAN PRO WRESTLING TITLE CHANGES

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
Junior Heavyweight	Hiromu Takahashi	Will Ospreay	01.04.20
U.S.	Jon Moxley	Lance Archer	01.04.20
Tag Team	David Finlay & Juice Robinson	Tama Tonga & Tanga Loa	01.04.20
Intercontinental	Tetsuya Naito	Jay White	01.04.20
IWGP Heavyweight	Tetsuya Naito	Kazuchika Okada	01.05.20
Tag Team	Tama Tonga & Tanga Loa	David Finlay & Juice Robinson	02.01.20
Tag Team	Hiroshi Tanahashi & Kota Ibushi	Tama Tonga & Tanga Loa	02.21.20
Tag Team	Zack Sabre Jr. & Taichi	Hiroshi Tanahashi & Kota Ibushi	07.12.20
Double Championship ¹	EVIL	Tetsuya Naito	07.12.20
Junior Heavyweight	Taiji Ishimori	Hiromu Takahashi	08.29.20
Double Championship	Tetsuya Naito	EVIL	08.29.20

¹Going forward, Heavyweight & Intercontinental titles were defended as the "Double Championship"

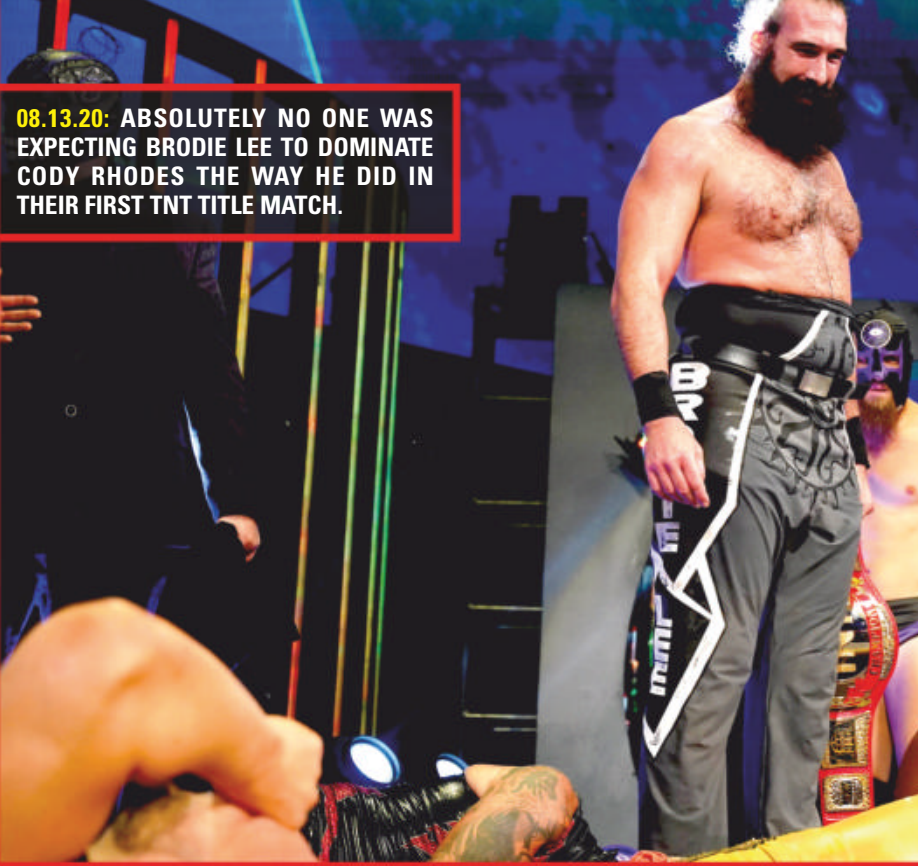
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07.20.20: SASHA BANKS ATTEMPTS A DROPKICK ON RAW WOMEN'S CHAMP ASUKA. THANKS TO A STIPULATION WHERE THE TITLE COULD CHANGE HANDS VIA COUNTOUT, BANKS WAS ABLE TO BEGIN A BRIEF REIGN AS CHAMPION.



08.18.20: ROHIT RAJU SEES HIS OPENING TO DELIVER A DEVASTATING DOUBLE-STOMP AND CAPTURE CHRIS BEY'S X DIVISION TITLE.



08.13.20: ABSOLUTELY NO ONE WAS EXPECTING BRODIE LEE TO DOMINATE CODY RHODES THE WAY HE DID IN THEIR FIRST TNT TITLE MATCH.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING

NWA TITLE CHANGES

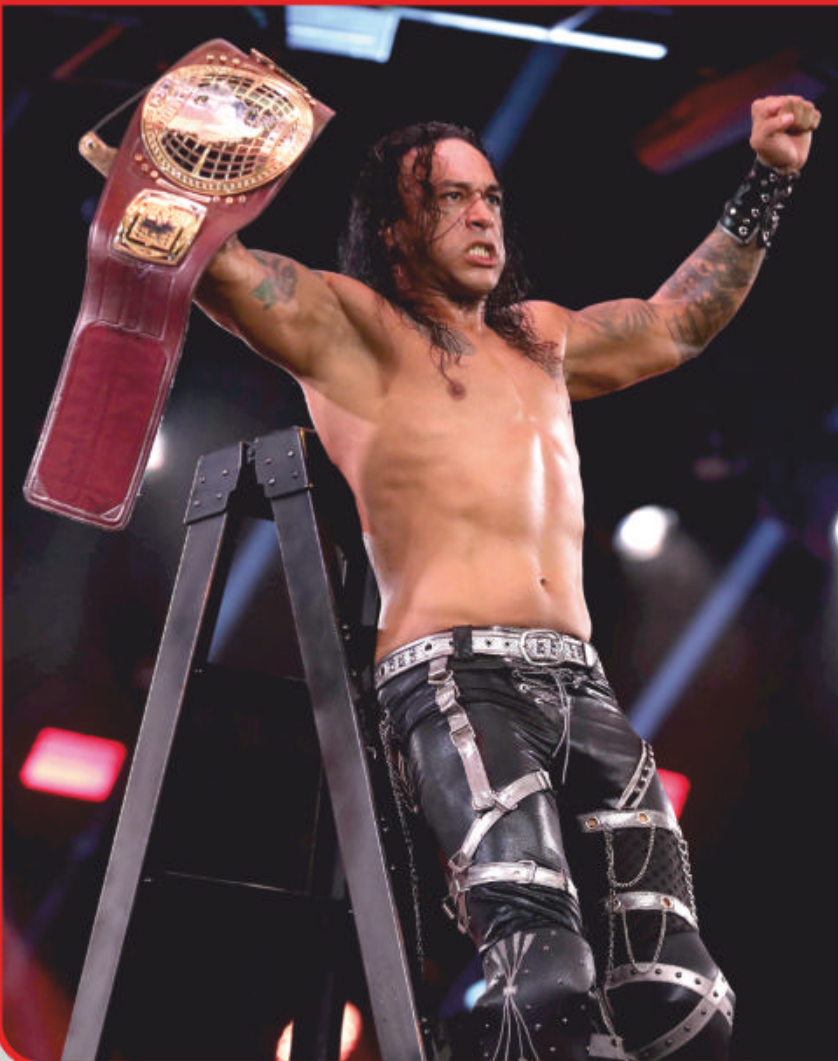
TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
Heavyweight	Nick Aldis ¹	—	—
Television	Ricky Starks ²	—	01.24.20
Tag Team ³	Eli Drake & James Storm	Ricky Morton & Robert Gibson	01.24.20
Women	Thunder Rosa	Allysin Kay	01.24.20
Television	Zicky Dice	Ricky Starks	01.26.20
National	Trevor Murdoch	Aron Stevens	09.29.20
Television	Elijah Burke	Zicky Dice	10.20.20
Women	Serena Deeb	Thunder Rosa	10.27.20
Tag Team	Aron Stevens & JR Kratos	Eli Drake & James Storm	11.10.20

¹Title held since October 21, 2018
²Beat Trevor Murdoch in the finals of the tournament to fill the vacant title
³Three-way included Royce Isaacs & Thomas Latimer



08.21.20: AJ STYLES' PLANS TO BE A LONG-REIGNING INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMPION ARE SOUNDLY THWARTED BY A DETERMINED JEFF HARDY.

08.22.20: AFTER THE TITLE WAS VOLUNTARILY SURRENDERED BY KEITH LEE, IT WAS DAMIAN PRIEST WHO WON AN INTENSE, FIVE-PERSON LADDER MATCH TO CROWN A NEW NORTH AMERICAN CHAMP.



08.22.20: KEITH LEE IS IN AGONY AS KARRION KROSS WRENCHES AWAY AT HIS WRIST. KROSS WOULD TAKE THIS MATCH—AND THE NXT TITLE—BUT WAS ALMOST IMMEDIATELY STRIPPED OF THE CHAMPIONSHIP DUE TO INJURY.

08.23.20: ASUKA BASKS IN THE MOMENT (AND THE ADULATION OF FANS IN WWE'S THUNDERDOME) AFTER BEATING SASHA BANKS FOR THE RAW WOMEN'S TITLE.



08.30.20: "THE FIEND" BRAY WYATT'S UNIVERSAL TITLE CELEBRATION IS CUT SHORT BY A RETURNING ROMAN REIGNS.



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08.26.20: FANDANGO AND TYLER BREEZE POSE WITH THE NXT TAG TEAM BELTS AFTER OVERTHROWING IMPERIUM.

08.29.20: STILL REELING FROM HIS LOSS TO EVIL IN JULY, TETSUYA NAITO RALLIES AGAINST HIS FORMER FRIEND AND IS ULTIMATELY ABLE TO RECLAIM THE IWGP "DOUBLE CHAMPIONSHIP."



08.29.20: AT NJPW'S OUTDOOR SUMMER STRUGGLE EVENT, TAIJI ISHIMORI SHOVS JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMP HIROMU TAKAHASHI INTO THE RING POST. ISHIMORI WOULD SOON BRING AN END TO TAKAHASHI'S FEEL-GOOD TITLE REIGN.

PRO WRESTLING NOAH TITLE CHANGES

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
Junior Heavyweight	Yoshinari Ogawa	HAYATA	01.04.20
GHC Heayvweight	Go Shiozaki	Kaito Kiyomiya	01.04.20
Tag Team	Masaaki Mochizuki & Naomichi Marufuji	Go Shiozaki & Katsuhiko Nakajima	01.05.20
Junior Heavyweight	Kotaro Suzuki	Yoshinari Ogawa	04.19.20
Tag Team	El Hijo del Dr. Wagner Jr. & Rene Dupree	Masaaki Mochizuki & Naomichi Marufuji	04.19.20
GHC National	Katsuhiko Nakajima	Takashi Sugiura	05.09.20
GHC National	Kenoh	Katsuhiko Nakajima	08.04.20
Tag Team	Kazushi Sakuraba & Takashi Sugiura ¹	—	08.30.20
Junior Heavyweight	Daisuke Harada	Kotaro Suzuki	11.08.20

¹Beat Go Shiozaki & Katsuhiko Nakajima to fill the vacant title

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08.30.20: AFTER ENTERING THE PAYBACK MAIN EVENT LATE—THANKS TO THE COACHING OF PAUL HEYMAN—ROMAN REIGNS WAS ABLE TO WALK AWAY WITH THE UNIVERSAL TITLE BELT.



08.30.20: THANKS TO FRICTION BETWEEN BAYLEY AND SASHA BANKS, THE MAKE-SHIFT TEAM OF SHAYNA BASZLER AND NIA JAX MANAGED TO CAPTURE THE WOMEN'S TAG TEAM CHAMPIONSHIP.

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08.30.20: BOBBY LASHLEY MANHANDLES APOLLO CREWS, LEAVING THE U.S. CHAMP BATTERED ... AND VULNERABLE TO LASHLEY'S PATENTED FULL-NELSON, WHICH HE WOULD USE TO SCORE THE SUBMISSION VICTORY.

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ROH TITLE CHANGES

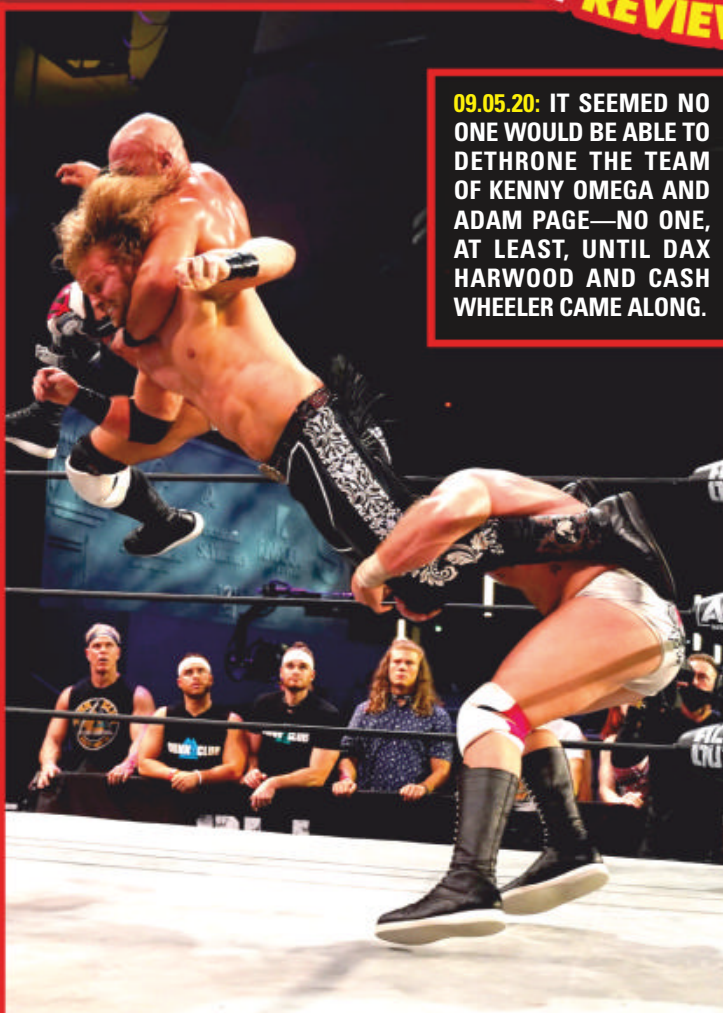
TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
Television	Ryu Lee ¹	—	—
Tag Team	Jonathan Gresham & Jay Lethal ²	—	—
Six-Man	Bandido, Flamita, & Rey Horus	Brody King, Flip Gordon, & Marty Scurll	01.11.20
Heavyweight ³	Rush	PCO	02.29.20
Pure	Jonathan Gresham ⁴	—	10.31.20

¹Title held since December 13, 2019
²Title held since December 13, 2019
³Three-way included Mark Haskins
⁴Beat Tracy Williams in the finals of a tournament to crown a new champion

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING



09.01.20: ERIC YOUNG CLEARLY HAD SOMETHING TO PROVE IN HIS MATCH AGAINST EDDIE EDWARDS. AND PROVE IT YOUNG DID, AS HE ENDED EDWARDS' IMPACT TITLE REIGN AT A MERE 45 DAYS.



09.05.20: IT SEEMED NO ONE WOULD BE ABLE TO DETHRONE THE TEAM OF KENNY OMEGA AND ADAM PAGE—NO ONE, AT LEAST, UNTIL DAX HARWOOD AND CASH WHEELER CAME ALONG.

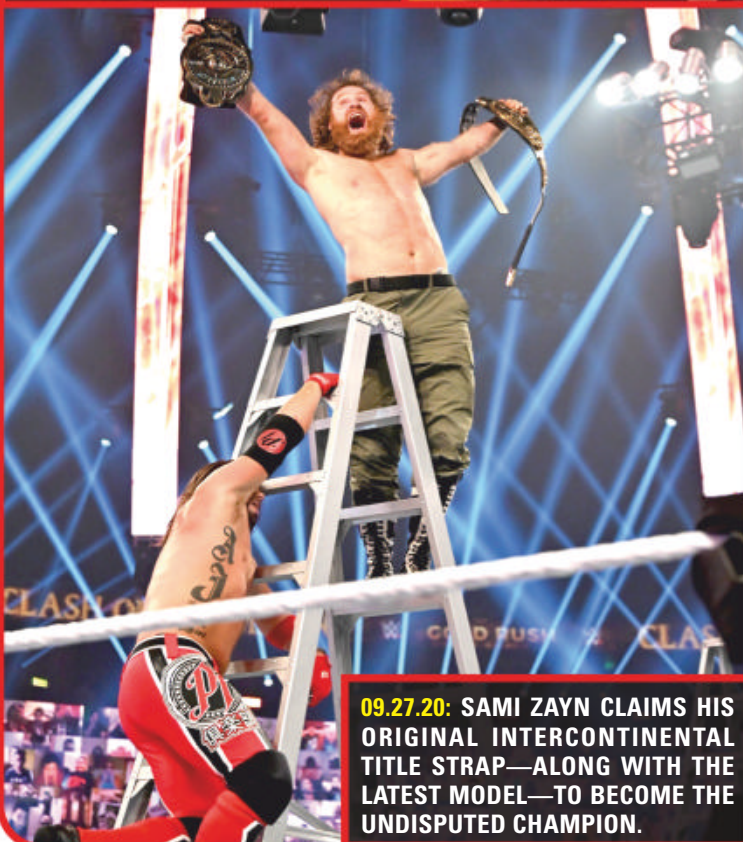
PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

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09.08.20: AFTER A FOUR-WAY BOUT FAILED TO FILL THE VACANT NXT TITLE, FINN BALOR AND ADAM COLE BATTLED IT OUT FOR THE BELT IN A COMPETITIVE MATCH THAT SAW BALOR WALK AWAY AS CHAMP.

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09.27.20: SAMI ZAYN CLAIMS HIS ORIGINAL INTERCONTINENTAL TITLE STRAP—ALONG WITH THE LATEST MODEL—TO BECOME THE UNDISPUTED CHAMPION.



10.07.20: DETERMINED TO AVENGE HIS EMBARRASSING LOSS TO LEE OVER THE SUMMER, CODY RHODES TAKES IT TO THE BIG MAN IN A BRUTAL DOG COLLAR MATCH (WHICH RHODES WOULD ULTIMATELY WIN).

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

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10.09.20: IT WAS A BITTERSWEET NIGHT FOR NEW DAY, AS XAVIER WOODS AND KOFI KINGSTON WON THE SMACKDOWN TAG BELTS, ONLY TO QUICKLY LEARN THEY WERE DRAFTED TO RAW . . . AND AWAY FROM PARTNER BIG E.

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10.12.20: WITH THE STREET PROFITS DRAFTED TO SMACKDOWN, WOODS AND KINGSTON MADE A DEAL WITH MONTEZ FORD AND ANGELO DAWKINS TO EXCHANGE THEIR SMACKDOWN TAG BELTS FOR THE RAW ONES.

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10.16.20: ON *FRIDAY NIGHT SMACKDOWN*, DAWKINS AND FORD MAKE THEIR FIRST OFFICIAL APPEARANCE AS THE BLUE BRAND'S TAG CHAMPS.

STARDOM TITLE CHANGES

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
World of Stardom	Mayu Iwatani ¹	—	—
Goddesses of Stardom	Bea Priestley & Jamie Hayter	Jungle Kyona & Konami	01.19.20
Artist of Stardom	Giulia, Maika, & Syuri	AZM, Momo Watanabe, & Utami Hayashishita	02.08.20
Future of Stardom	Maika ²	—	07.17.20
High Speed Champion	AZM	Riho	07.26.20
Goddesses of Stardom	Saya Kamitani & Utami Hayashishita ³	—	07.26.20
Wonder of Stardom	Giulia ⁴	—	07.26.20
Artist of Stardom	Bea Priestley, Natsuko Tora, & Saki Kashima	Giulia, Maika, & Syuri	11.14.20
World of Stardom	Utami Hayashishita	Mayu Iwatani	11.15.20
Artist of Stardom	Mina Shirakawa, Tam Nakano, & Unagi Sayaka	Bea Priestley, Natsuko Tora, & Saki Kashima	12.16.20
Future of Stardom	Saya Iida ⁵	Maika	12.20.20

¹Held since November 4, 2019

²Beat Saya Iida and Saya Kamitani in a three-way to fill the vacant title

³Defeated Jungle Kyona & Konami to fill the vacant title

⁴Beat Tam Nakano in the finals of a tournament to fill the vacant title

⁵Triple-threat included Saya Kamitani

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING



10.24.20: AFTER THE NORTH TOOK OUT ALEX SHELLEY, CHRIS SABIN WAS FORCED TO DEFEND THE IMPACT TAG BELTS ALONE IN A FOUR-WAY THAT THE NORTH ULTIMATELY WON.

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING



10.24.20: SU YUNG MARKED HER RETURN TO HER OLD PERSONA (AND AWAY FROM THE CHILDLIKE "SUSIE") BY DEFEATING DEONNA PURRAZZO FOR THE KNOCKOUTS TITLE.

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING



10.24.20: RICH SWANN SHOWS OFF THE IMPACT HEAVY-WEIGHT TITLE AFTER VALIANTLY DEFEATING ERIC YOUNG IN THE MAIN EVENT OF BOUND FOR GLORY.

UNBRANDED WWE TITLES

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
Women's Tag Team	Alexa Bliss & Nikki Cross	Asuka & Kairi Sane	03.25.20
Women's Tag Team	Bayley & Sasha Banks	Alexa Bliss & Nikki Cross	05.26.20
Women's Tag Team	Nia Jax & Shayna Baszler	Bayley & Sasha Banks	08.30.20
Women's Tag Team	Asuka & Charlotte Flair	Nia Jax & Shayna Baszler	12.20.20

10.25.20: SASHA BANKS SHOWED A FIRE WE HAVEN'T SEEN FROM HER IN QUITE SOME TIME, DECISIVELY BEATING FORMER "BESTIE" BAYLEY BY SUBMISSION AT HELL IN A CELL. BANKS' SMACKDOWN TITLE WIN SEEMED AS INEVITABLE AS THE BREAKUP OF THE GOLDEN ROLE MODELS HAD TWO MONTHS PRIOR.



10.25.20: RANDY ORTON KNOCKS DREW MCINTYRE FROM THE HELL IN A CELL STRUCTURE AND THROUGH THE ANNOUNCE TABLE—SETTING THE STAGE FOR ORTON TO WIN THE MATCH AND THE WWE HEAVYWEIGHT TITLE.

WWE NXT TITLE CHANGES

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
U.K. Heavyweight	WALTER ¹	—	—
U.K. Women	Kay Lee Ray ²	—	—
U.K. Tag Team	Mark Coffey & Wolfgang ³	—	—
North American	Keith Lee	Roderick Strong	01.22.20
Cruiserweight (U.K.) ⁵	Jordan Devlin ⁴	Angel Garza	01.25.20
Tag Team	Matt Riddle & Pete Dunne	Bobby Fish & Kyle O'Reilly	02.16.20
Women	Charlotte Flair	Rhea Ripley	03.25.20
Tag Team	Fabian Aichner & Marcel Barthel	Matt Riddle & Pete Dunne	05.13.20
Cruiserweight	Santos Escobar ⁶	—	05.27.20
Women	Io Shirai ⁷	Charlotte Flair	06.07.20
Heavyweight	Keith Lee	Adam Cole	07.01.20
North American	Damian Priest ⁸	—	08.22.20
Heavyweight	Karrion Kross	Keith Lee	08.22.20
Tag Team	Fandango & Tyler Breeze	Fabian Aichner & Marcel Barthel	08.26.20
Heavyweight	Finn Balor ⁹	—	09.08.20
Tag Team	Danny Burch & Oney Lorcan	Fandango & Tyler Breeze	10.21.20
North American	Johnny Gargano	Damian Priest	10.28.20
North American	Leon Ruff	Johnny Gargano	11.11.20
North American	Johnny Gargano ¹⁰	Leon Ruff	12.06.20

¹Title held since April 5, 2019

²Title held since August 31, 2019

³Title held since October 4, 2019

⁴Four-way included Isaiah Scott and Travis Banks

⁵Title became disputed after Santos Escobar won NXT Cruiserweight title tournament

⁶Beat Drake Maverick in tournament final to fill the vacant title

⁷Three-way included Rhea Ripley

⁸Beat Bronson Reed, Cameron Grimes, Johnny Gargano, and Velveteen Dream in a Ladder Match to fill the vacant title

⁹Defeated Adam Cole to fill the vacant title

¹⁰Triple-threat included Damian Priest

PHOTO BY RING OF HONOR



10.31.20: AFTER HIS HARD-FOUGHT WIN OVER TRACY WILLIAMS IN THE FINAL OF THE ROH PURE TITLE TOURNAMENT, JONATHAN GRESHAM POSES WITH HIS TROPHY AND CHAMPIONSHIP BELT.



11.07.20: TNT CHAMPION CODY RHODES ATTEMPTS TO PUT AWAY CHALLENGER DARBY ALLIN WITH THE CROSS RHODES. BUT, IN THE END, ALLIN WOULD EMERGE CHAMPION.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

WWE RAW TITLE CHANGES

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
Tag Team	Murphy & Seth Rollins	Erik & Ivar	01.20.20
Tag Team	Angelo Dawkins & Montez Ford	Murphy & Seth Rollins	03.02.20
World Heavyweight	Drew McIntyre	Brock Lesnar	03.25.20
Women	Asuka ¹	—	05.10.20
U.S.	Apollo Crews	Andrade	05.25.20
Women	Sasha Banks	Asuka	07.20.20
Women	Asuka	Sasha Banks	08.23.20
U.S.	Bobby Lashley	Apollo Crews	08.30.20
Tag Team	Kofi Kingston & Xavier Woods ²	—	10.12.20
World Heavyweight	Randy Orton	Drew McIntyre	10.25.20
World Heavyweight	Drew McIntyre	Randy Orton	11.16.20
Tag Team	Cedric Alexander & Shelton Benjamin	Kofi Kingston & Xavier Woods	12.20.20

¹Was awarded vacant title due to winning Money in the Bank contract

²Were crowned champions after being drafted to Raw



11.07.20: THE ELITE REJOICES AFTER BROTHERS NICK AND MATT JACKSON DEFEAT FTR FOR THE AEW WORLD TAG TEAM TITLE AT FULL GEAR.



11.14.20: THOUGH A NO-DQ MATCH WOULD TYPICALLY FAVOR SU YUNG, DEONNA PURRAZZO HAD LITTLE TROUBLE ADAPTING TO THE ENVIRONMENT—DEFEATING YUNG TO RECLAIM THE KNOCKOUTS TITLE.



11.14.20: LONGTIME PARTNERS KARL ANDERSON AND DOC GALLOWS CELEBRATE THEIR IMPACT TAG TITLE VICTORY OVER THE NORTH. THE GOOD BROTHERS HAVE CLEARLY LANDED ON THEIR FEET AFTER BEING RELEASED BY WWE THIS SPRING.



11.16.20: TALK ABOUT "BIG MATCH FEEL!" RANDY ORTON AND DREW MCINTYRE STARE DAGGERS INTO ONE ANOTHER BEFORE THE MATCH WHERE MCINTYRE WOULD RECLAIM THE WWE WORLD TITLE.

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING

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12.02.20: KENNY OMEGA PACES THE RING LIKE A MAN POSSESSED, PRIOR TO UNSEATING JON MOXLEY AS AEW WORLD CHAMP.

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12.06.20: JOHNNY GARGANO HAD HIS HANDS FULL WITH THE DEFENDING CHAMP, LEON RUFF, BUT WAS ABLE TO WALK AWAY WITH THE NXT NORTH AMERICAN BELT FOLLOWING OUTSIDE INTERFERENCE.

PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING



12.12.20: DONNING A MASK AS HIS FORMER PERSONA MANIK, TJP WON THE "DEFEAT ROHIT" CHALLENGE—BESTING RAJU AND TAKING HOME THE X DIVISION TITLE.

WWE SMACKDOWN TITLE CHANGES

TITLE	WON BY	WON FROM	DATE
Intercontinental	Braun Strowman	Shinsuke Nakamura	01.31.20
Tag Team	John Morrison & The Miz	Big E & Kofi Kingston	02.27.20
Universal	Goldberg	Bray Wyatt	02.27.20
Intercontinental	Sami Zayn ¹	Braun Strowman	03.08.20
Universal	Braun Strowman	Goldberg	03.25.20
Tag Team	Big E & Kofi Kingston ²	John Morrison & The Miz	04.17.20
Intercontinental	AJ Styles ³	—	06.12.20
Tag Team	Cesaro & Nakamura	Big E & Kofi Kingston	07.19.20
Intercontinental	Jeff Hardy	AJ Styles	08.21.20
Universal	Bray Wyatt	Braun Strowman	08.23.20
Universal	Roman Reigns ⁴	Bray Wyatt	08.30.20
Intercontinental	Sami Zayn ⁵	Jeff Hardy	09.27.20
Tag Team	Kofi Kingston & Xavier Woods	Cesaro & Nakamura	10.09.20
Tag Team	Angelo Dawkins & Montez Ford ⁶	—	10.12.20
Women	Sasha Banks	Bayley	10.25.20

¹Won a three-on-one handicap match (teaming with Cesaro & Shinsuke Nakamura)
²Big E defeated Morrison and Jey Uso in a three-way ladder match
³Beat Daniel Bryan in the final of a tournament to fill the vacant title
⁴Three-way match included Braun Strowman
⁵Won a three-way ladder match that included AJ Styles
⁶Awarded the title after being drafted to Smackdown

THE YEAR IN PWI

JANUARY 9



Adam Cole revealed as *PWI's* Wrestler of the Year for 2019.

FEBRUARY 1

Kevin McElvaney presents Brian Pillman Jr. with Rookie of the Year plaque at MLW tapings.

MARCH 6

AJ Styles named Wrestler of the Decade, as voted by our readers.

MARCH 10

Longtime *PWI* Editor-in-Chief Stu Saks announces his retirement from the magazine, McElvaney as his replacement.

MARCH 24



PWI Weekly relaunched as free weekly email newsletter.

APRIL 3

Wrestling Twitter erupts after learning *PWI* recognizes only four heavyweight singles championships as legitimate world titles: WWE, WWE Universal, IWGP, and AEW.

APRIL 14

Our "Editors Roundtable" is resurrected as a YouTube series, with episode one focusing on cinematic matches.

MAY 26

Stu Saks makes a rare appearance on The *PWI* Podcast, where he is toasted by Al Castle, Brian Solomon, and Harry Burkett, along with former colleagues Bill Apter, Craig Peters, and "Matt Brock."

JUNE 5

Stu packs up his desk and heads home to enjoy a long-deserved



JULY 2

retirement. With the digital publication of our October 2020 issue, Jason McVeigh officially joins the *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* team as a Contributing Writer.

JULY 21

Bell to Belles' Kristen Ashly and Harmony Cox appear on *PWI's* Virtual Roundtable to discuss women's wrestling, marking the first official collaboration between the popular women's wrestling website and our magazine.

AUGUST 18

PWI shares Virtual Roundtable on intergender wrestling featuring Gail Kim, Ethan Page, Tasha Steelz, Trish Adora, Heather Monroe, and Jamie Senegal.

AUGUST 27



Jon Moxley is revealed as the #1 wrestler on 2020's "500" list, first on social media and then on that night's *Dynamite*.

AUGUST 28

With digital publication of the December 2020 issue, Jake Joyce and Ashley Morris officially join our list of Contributing Writers.

OCTOBER 8

First-ever "Tag Team 50" list is formally announced in the latest edition of *PWI Weekly*.

OCTOBER 28

Bayley is named as the #1 ranked wrestler in our Women's 100. Andrea Hangst, Righteous Reg, Pat Laprade, Walter Yeates, and Kristen Ashly officially join *PWI* writers' roster.

NOVEMBER 12

Lucha Libre AAA's tag team and Trios championships are formally given world title status.

NOVEMBER 18



FTR are revealed as the top-ranked team in the inaugural "Tag Team 50."

DECEMBER 18

Madusa Miceli and Stu Saks are announced as the 2020 recipients of the Stanley Weston Award.

IN MEMORIAM

**“Bullet” Bob Armstrong
“Killer” Tim Brooks
Adam Bueller
Aguila Tapatia
Al Vass
Ares el Guerrero
Atila el Rey
Beckie Mullen
Bello Andy
Bengali
Billy Caputo
Black Demon
Blackman II
Bobby Kay
Bob Ryder
Carlos Rocha
Carnicero Aguilar
Casey Michael
Charlie Cook
Cheon Gyu-deok
Chris Hyatte
Cinico
Crusher Doogan
Danny Havoc
Danny Langdon
Dean Silverstone
Dick Steinborn
Discovery
Dr. Julian Shabazz
Dragon Chino II
Ed “Haystacks” Ross
El Audaz
El Molusco
Estrella Blanca III
Esther Leon de Moreno
Florencio Pina
Gary Fitzgerald
Gerardo Martin Landeros
Mendiola
Gerome Phillips
Hana Kimura
Hercules Ayala
Herodes**

**Howard Finkel
Indio Yoko
Isaac Rosario
Jack Lotz
Jackie Stevens
James “Kamala” Harris
Jamie Jackson
Jerry Brown
Joe Black
Joe Pedicino
Joe Perri
Joey Glietz
Joey Scarlo
John Jenkins
Johnny Meadows
Jon Ian
Jonathan Ramirez
Jose Ficca
Jaguar Vijay Singh
Juan Ramirez
Justice Pain
Kaiser
Karsten Beck
Kat LeRoux
Kendo Nagasaki
Killer Machine
Kilowanito
King Cobra
Kraken
La Parka II
Larry Csonka
Len Rossi
Lorraine Johnson
Luis Dasa
Mark “Rollerball” Rocco
Matematico II
Matt Travis
Michael Blade
Mike Somaini
Mitch Ryder
Mr. Wrestling II
Nick Steel
Olga Martinez**

**Pampero Firpo
Pat Patterson
Pepe Luis Esparza
Pilatos
Principe Aereo
Punos de Roca
Rey Muerte
Rip Oliver
RJ “The Bruiser” Meyer
Road Warrior Animal
Rocky Johnson
Rudy Garduno
Ryan Smile
Sangre Fria
Sangre Guerrero
Septiembre Negro Jr.
Shad Gaspard
Sombra Vengadora
Steve Gillespie
Steve Lee
Steven Lee Perry
Super Bracito
Supreme
Sylvano Sousa
Teijo Khan
Temerario I
Terry Dart
The Samoan Beast
The Zebra Kid
Tom Anderson
Tom Farhat
Tony Casta
Tracy Smothers
Ultimo Cholo
Vaquero de Texas Jr.
Walter McDonald
Wayne Bridges
Winona Littleheart
Xavier
Z-Barr
Zoltan Boscik**

OFFICIAL/UNOFFICIAL AWARDS

PURE GENIUS AWARD:

ROH Brings Back Pure Championship

—Matthew Rooy

MOST UNDERRATED PROMOTION:

Major League Wrestling

—Harry Pawlik

MAURO RANALLO “MAMMA MIA” MOMENT:

The Return of Ember Moon

—Jennifer Stevens

2020 ENTER SANDMAN AWARD:

Chris Jericho’s Theme “Judas”

—Robert Lindynut

DESERVES WORLD TITLE STATUS:

NWA Heavyweight Title

—Steve Russell

WHAT DID YOU EXPECT? IT’S HIS NAME!:

Evil betrays Tetsuya Naito

—Eric Geores

BEST TALK SHOW:

KO Show

—John Koenig

FOOT-IN-MOUTH AWARD:

Sammy Guevara

—Cedrick Ramsey

NOT AGAIN:

Nia Jax Puts Lana Through a Table Eight Times

—Jay Querubin

AEW DARK MVP:

Ricky Starks

—Brandon Laliberte

SOON TO BE OUT OF STYLE:

AJ Styles

—Ronald Carrington

SOMEHOW, IT ONLY MADE HER CREEPIER:

Su Yung Becomes “Susie”

—Eric Geores



PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING

ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?:

Cody Rhodes’ neck tattoo

—Scott Awtrey

WOMAN OF THE YEAR:

Bayley

—Matt Gehm

IT’S 5 O’CLOCK SOMEWHERE:

Adam Page

—Ernest Stalder

THE DIESEL BODYGUARD AWARD:

Wardlow

—Harry Pawlik

KING DIAMOND LOOKALIKE:

Danhausen

—Eric Kratzer

WHAT WENT WRONG FOR THIS PROMOTION?:

Impact Wrestling

—Robert Lindynut

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO



RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS:

Brock Lesnar’s Face After Working the First Half of the Royal Rumble

—Jennifer Stevens

OFFICIAL/UNOFFICIAL AWARDS

SILVER LINING OF 2020 AWARD:

Quinn McKay's Twitter

—Jason Knuth

PHOTO BY MGC MEDIA



BURIAL OF THE YEAR:

Boneyard Match

—Blade Culver

A BRIGHT LIGHT IN A DARK ORDER:

Anna Jay

—Marty Kibler

RISING STAR:

Billie Starkz

—Steven Bradley

MOST INFLUENTIAL EVENT:

For The Culture

—Steven Bradley

CLEANING UP AEW'S MIDCARD:

Kenny Omega

—Tony Laplume

TERRY JONES MEMORIAL "HE'S NOT THE MESSIAH, HE'S A VERY NAUGHTY BOY" AWARD:

Seth Rollins

—Jay Grymyr

GO-HOME:

The Mysterio-Rollins Story

—Cedrick Ramsey

BEAUTY AND THE BEEF:

Otis and Mandy Rose

—John J. Siget III

I'LL DO ANYTHING YOU ASK AWARD:

Sammy Guevara

—Jason Knuth

NOW CAN WE ENTER THE AGE OF AQUARIUS?:

The stars align and Sasha Banks is champion of the world

—Elia Barbatì

PROBABLY HAS BEEN COW TIPPIN' AWARD:

"Hangman" Page

—Brian Crawford

BEST WRESTLEMANIA MOMENT:

Kevin Owens

—John Koenig

CINEMATIC MATCH OF THE YEAR:

Stadium Stampede

—Jason Knuth

THE LGBTQ+ PRIDE WORLD CHAMPION:

Nyla Rose

—Zachary Emberton

THE "HONOR IS REAL" AWARD FOR REAL WRESTLING:

ROH Pure Tournament

—Zachary Emberton

KAREN OF THE YEAR:

Bayley

—Steve Russell

HEAVEN NEEDED A RING ANNOUNCER:

Howard Finkel

—Robert Lindynut



PHOTO BY STU SAKS

COVID-19 TRANSFORMS PRO WRESTLING

THE GREATEST GLOBAL menace of 2020 crippled some industries and obliterated others, yet professional wrestling—historically reliant on close contact inside the ring and large crowds outside of it—adapted remarkably well despite positivity rates and overall cases of COVID-19 surging again toward the end of the year. Wrestling remained a spectator sport, even if the spectators were (mostly) forced to remain home.

Unlike the NBA, NHL, and MLB, WWE never suspended its season. The March 13 edition of *Smackdown*, held at the Performance Center, was the first major sports or entertainment event held with no audience. WrestleMania 36 was filmed there two weeks later. There was no live gate, but social-media interactions and online views along WWE's various digital platforms set new records.

Yet there were flaws in WWE's protocols that it quickly tried to resolve. AJ Styles, Rusev, Renee Young, Kayla Braxton, Adam Pearce, and Jamie Noble were among those who were diagnosed with COVID. Kevin Owens became the most vocal proponent of wearing masks, urging WWE Chairman and CEO Vince McMahon to penalize those who broke protocol, and taking his message to social media. "At best, it helps save lives," Owens posted on Twitter. "While at worst, making fun of people wearing a mask, and not wearing a mask yourself, and telling people not to wear a mask can help spread this disease and make things worse."

To reduce costs, WWE released quite a few wrestlers including Rusev, Erick Rowan, Karl Anderson, Luke Gallows, EC3, Eric Young, Deonna Purrazzo, and Heath Slater.

AEW ended live broadcasts and taped episodes of *Dynamite* and *Dark*, first at Daily's Place in Jacksonville, and then, during a brief shutdown in Florida, at the Nightmare Factory in Norcross, Georgia—at one point taping nearly 30 matches before a midnight curfew. AEW had returned to Jacksonville in time for Double or Nothing, its first pay-per-view since the onset of the pandemic. AEW President Tony Khan admitted the company "lost millions."

Without millions of dollars to lose or millions to invest in bubble environments, Ring of Honor, Impact Wrestling, the NWA, and countless indies suspended operations. ROH, for example, didn't resume its weekly television tapings until August, when its Pure title tournament got underway. Likewise, New Japan resumed operations with the New Japan Cup in June and July.

At SummerSlam, WWE unveiled ThunderDome, a videoconferencing crowd experience composed of (or comprising) of nearly 1,000 LED boards, at the Amway Center in Orlando. WWE introduced a similar concept on a smaller scale for *NXT* within the Performance Center—dubbed the "Capitol Wrestling Center"—at TakeOver 31 on October 4. The light-show techniques on both sets are sure to influence WWE presentations for years to come.

WWE was set to move ThunderDome to St. Petersburg's Tropicana Field for the December 11 broadcast of *Smackdown*.

The November release of longtime ring announcer Tony Chimel seemed to confirm that WWE plans to revamp its business model to eliminate most house shows. During the pandemic, WWE executives realized the lack of live-event touring actually kept their athletes healthier. And, besides, WWE Shop simply picked up all of those merchandise sales ... and then some.

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JOHN CENA AND BRAY WYATT TRY TO BUILD ANTICIPATION FOR THEIR WRESTLEMANIA MATCH INSIDE AN EMPTY PERFORMANCE CENTER.

WRESTLING GETS MORE CINEMATIC

WRESTLING PROMOTIONS' INABILITY to perform in front live crowds during the COVID-19 pandemic gave birth to a new trend of "cinematic" matches that emphasized theatrics over athletics.

Although cinematic wrestling matches had been around in some form for years, the craze reached new heights in 2020, starting with the biggest event on the calendar.

Two of the most memorable matches of WrestleMania 36 were presented as, essentially, short films. The first night of the two-night event was headlined by the Undertaker defeating AJ Styles in a "Boneyard Match" that was shot at a Florida cemetery and featured several Hollywood production techniques, including a soundtrack provided by heavy metal legends, Metallica. Though rejected by some wrestling traditionalists, the match was largely well-received by fans, who found the theatrical tone especially fitting for an Undertaker match.

The Firefly Fun House Match between John Cena and Bray Wyatt on the second night of WrestleMania proved far more controversial. Much of the "match" seemed to play out in some sort of alternate dimension in Wyatt's consciousness. At one point, John Cena appeared to join the nWo. In another, the two were transported back in time to a 1980s edition of *Saturday Night's Main Event*.

Despite mixed reaction to the two matches, WWE—and other wrestling companies—did not let up on the cinematic clashes. At a time when matchmakers were severely hamstrung by the lack of a live crowd reaction, they jumped at the opportunity to break free of some of the limitations of wrestling norms.

Some bouts, like Johnny Gargano's "One Final Beat" hour-long battle with Tommaso Ciampa, used production techniques to inject some extra drama into an otherwise traditional grudge match. Others featured high doses of comedy and unconventional settings, like

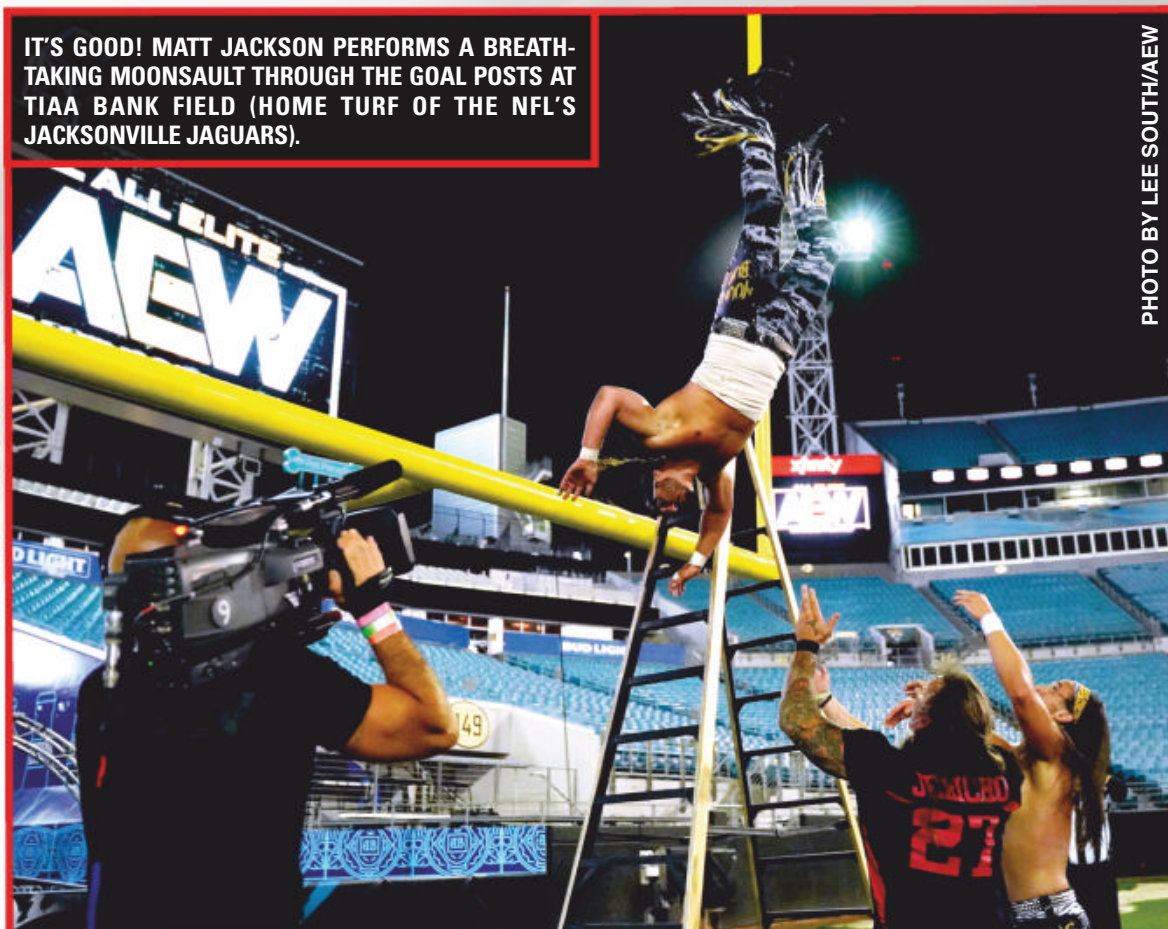
AEW's Stadium Stampede bout at All or Nothing, or WWE's Money in the Bank ladder match, which took place inside WWE's Stamford, Connecticut, corporate offices. Adam Cole and the Velveteen Dream took their NXT championship program to the "backlot" of Full Sail University for a brawl that was illuminated by the headlights of parked cars. And cinematic match pioneer Matt Hardy resurrected his "Broken Universe" for an "Elite Deletion" bout with Sammy Guevara at AEW's Full Gear pay-per-view. Even Impact Wrestling got in on the fun at its signature event, Bound for Glory, where Moose defeated EC3 in a heavily produced match scored by indie pop music.

But no amount of editing or production tricks could disguise bad wrestling. And so, the main event of WWE's Extreme Rules event—a "Swamp Fight" between Bray Wyatt and Braun Strowman—was almost universally panned for its awful action and inane storytelling. The contest ended when Wyatt apparently drowned Strowman in a lake.

In a June media conference call, WWE executive vice president Paul "Triple-H" Levesque attempted to play down the cinematic wrestling movement.

"People were doing that 20 years ago. Rock and Mick Foley [on] *Halftime Heat*. Austin and Booker T in the grocery store," Levesque said. "There's so many of those things over the years that have happened."

IT'S GOOD! MATT JACKSON PERFORMS A BREATHTAKING MOONSAULT THROUGH THE GOAL POSTS AT TIAA BANK FIELD (HOME TURF OF THE NFL'S JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS).



UNDERTAKER RESTS IN PEACE?

THREE DECADES AFTER he stepped into a WWE ring for the first time, the unparalleled wrestling career of the Undertaker appeared to come to an end in 2020—a year in which fans came to know the real man behind the “Dead Man” like never before.

After diligently protecting his character for most of his career, Mark Calaway—’Taker’s alter ego—provided fans with unprecedented access and insight into his life through a five-part documentary series on the WWE Network.

The Last Ride began production in 2017, when The Undertaker invited a film crew to shadow him in the days leading up to what he thought would be his retirement match against Roman Reigns at WrestleMania 33. Instead, the documentary stretched over three years, and captured WWE’s “Phenom” in candid moments of self-doubt, reflection, and determination to leave a lasting legacy on the wrestling business.

“People have been clamoring for years and years to get a peek behind the curtain, so I knew that people would be excited to get a closer look at Mark Calaway,” Undertaker said in an interview with Yahoo! Sports. “As we put each episode together, I have become much more comfortable, to the point of actually enjoying the process of being able to give my personal insight into things that people have had so much conjecture about. I’ve been able to hopefully enlighten people to my mindset. I have been very pleased overall to how people have reacted to this. It has been very humbling.”

The series built up to answering a question on the minds of WWE fans around the world: Had The Undertaker wrestled his last match? Although his Boneyard Match with AJ Styles was widely praised as one of the most entertaining bouts of the year, fans questioned whether ’Taker would really retire following a pre-taped, cinematic match held away from live fans.

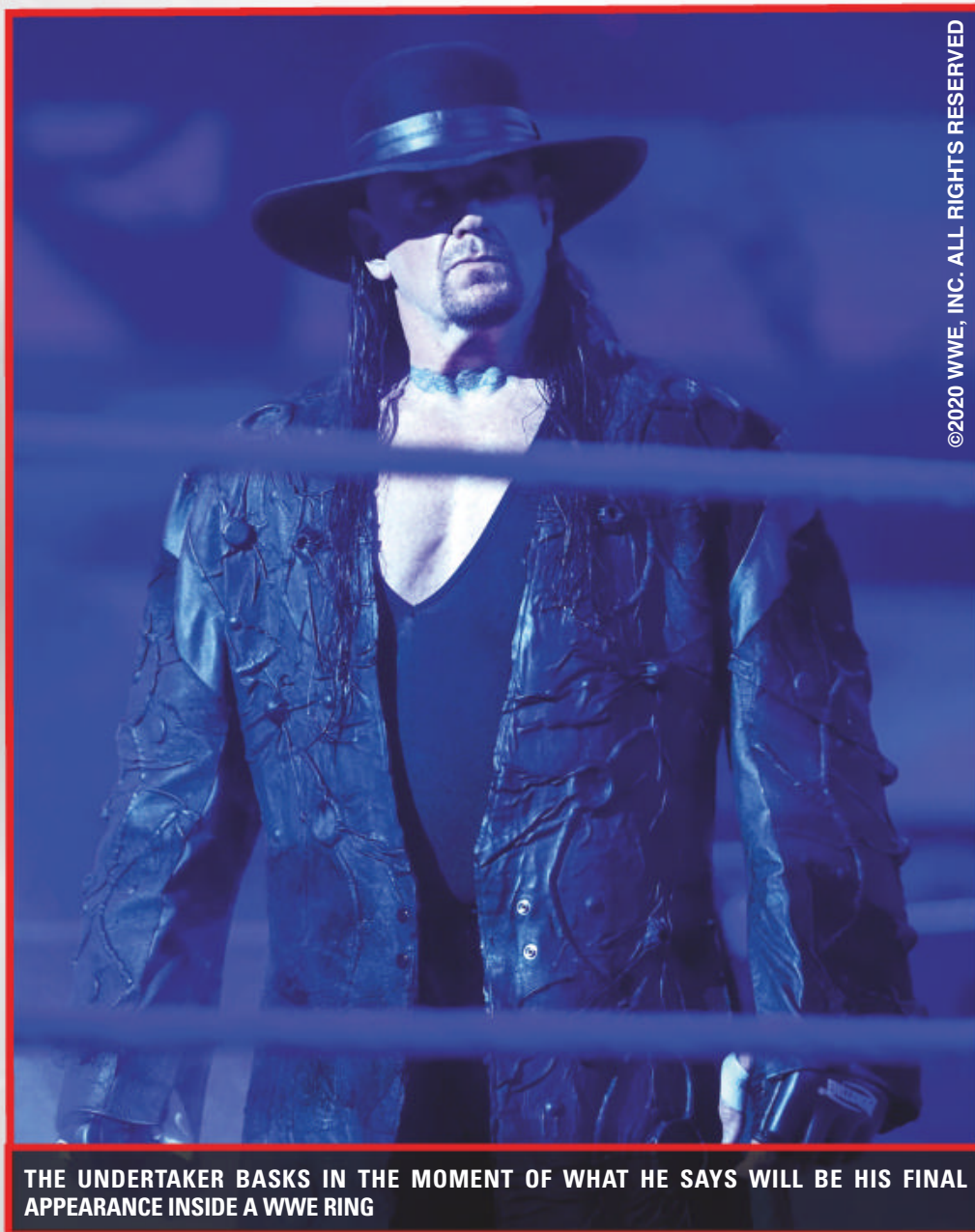
In the final installment of the series, the 55-year-old Undertaker appeared to answer the question in the affirmative, although he left open the possibility of returning to the ring if summoned

by WWE Chairman Vince McMahon in an emergency. “Never say never, but at this point in my life and my career, I have no desire to get back in the ring,” he said.

With a sense of finality to it, WWE celebrated The Undertaker’s career at Survivor Series, on the 30th anniversary of his debut in the promotion. The Undertaker’s “Final Farewell” was featured in the main event slot of the show, and featured cameos from important figures from throughout his career, ranging from his on-screen brother Kane to members of the “Bone Street Krew” backstage faction, Savio Vega, The Godfather, and the Godwinns.

“And now, my time has come,” the seven-time world champion said in his farewell remarks. “My time has come to let The Undertaker rest in peace.”

Embracing his next chapter, Undertaker continued to let his hair down like never before—making appearances on numerous talk shows, starting an Instagram account, and even recording personalized video messages through Cameo at \$1,000 a pop.



THE UNDERTAKER BASKS IN THE MOMENT OF WHAT HE SAYS WILL BE HIS FINAL APPEARANCE INSIDE A WWE RING

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'MANIA 36: NOT AN EXTRAVAGANZA, BUT EXTRAORDINARY

EVERY WRESTLEMANIA IS promoted as a WrestleMania like no other, but the 2020 edition of WWE's premier event was truly unique, with the company deserving high praise for its incredible effort during an unprecedented time—and all of us hoping it would never look like this again.

Consider the historic firsts: It was the first WrestleMania with no live audience. It was the first 'Mania taped in advance ... on March 25 and 26, a week before its eventual airing. And, borrowing the concept from New Japan's Wrestle Kingdom 14, WrestleMania aired over two nights, on Saturday, April 4, and Sunday, April 5. Unfortunately, these weren't back-to-back engagements at the Tokyo Dome. WWE had the daunting task of making its Performance Center seem special.

COVID-19 had prompted a dramatic revamping of WWE's weekly programs, due to social-distancing restrictions imposed on personnel and the number of superstars who opted to go on hiatus. Roman Reigns pulled out of his bout against Universal champion Bill Goldberg, resulting in Braun Strowman making a hastily arranged challenge.

The Undertaker vs. AJ Styles in a Boneyard Match headlined the first night. WWE employed its controversial cinematic style, with Undertaker-Styles seeming more like a prolonged action scene than a wrestling match. 'Taker won by dropping Styles into a six-foot-deep grave and then using a front-end loader (although a terrific name for a signature move, it was an actual front-end loader) to push soil

over the gravesite. The following night's Firefly Fun House Match, The Fiend vs. John Cena, consisted of surreal flashbacks and dream sequences.

While world championship matches are always a staple of WrestleMania, neither Strowman's Universal title win over Goldberg nor Drew McIntyre's heralded WWE title victory over Brock Lesnar will be remembered as great, dramatic bouts. The combined time of both matches was only seven minutes.

Unlike many of the WM 36 encounters, the Last Man Standing match pitting Edge—returning after an eight-year absence—against friend-turned-foe Randy Orton benefitted from plenty of buildup, emotional energy, and tremendous athleticism from both combatants. After the aforementioned cinematic matches, their brawl on top of an 18-wheeler didn't seem so outrageous. Edge bashed Orton with a Con-Chair-To on the steel of the truck to score the win.

Two highly anticipated women's matches graced WrestleMania. On night one, Becky Lynch resorted to some out-of-the-ring brawling to break the momentum of Shayna Baszler's submission strategy, and then leveraged Baszler's Kirifuda Clutch into a pinfall at the eight-minute mark. On night two, Charlotte Flair defeated Rhea Ripley for the NXT Women's title at 20:27, outmaneuvering her with classic pro wrestling moves—toeholds, chop blocks, and moonsaults, in addition to the Figure-Eight—while confirming Ripley as a genuine star.

In other notable bouts, Aleister Black kicked Bobby Lashley's lights out, Otis defended Mandy Rose's honor with a win over Dolph Ziggler, Kevin Owens beat Seth Rollins with a stunner, John Morrison beat Kofi Kingston and Jimmy Uso in a special ladder match to claim the Smackdown tag team title for himself and The Miz, Intercontinental champion Sami Zayn scored a narrow win over Daniel Bryan, and Alexa Bliss and Nikki Cross ended The Kabuki Warriors' six-month Women's tag team title reign.

SHAYNA BASZLER APPLIES A CROSS ARMBREAKER TO BECKY LYNCH IN THEIR RAW WOMEN'S TITLE MATCH AT WRESTLEMANIA 36. THE TWO-DAY EVENT WASN'T EXACTLY AN INSTANT CLASSIC, BUT IT WAS CERTAINLY MEMORABLE FOR A NUMBER OF REASONS.



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HEEL REIGNS BECOMES HEAD OF THE TABLE

THE FANS ASKED for it. Roman Reigns demanded it. In 2020, Reigns, who had been pushed as WWE's top babyface star despite fan resistance for a half-decade, turned full-fledged heel.

The risky move paid off. Reigns became the most intriguing character on WWE television, *Smackdown* experienced an increase in ratings, the rich Anoa'i-Fatu family dynamic was finally a storyline focus, Jey Uso emerged as a breakout singles star, and Reigns gained a fresh slate of potential new opponents.

Still, few saw it coming. Reigns was diagnosed with leukemia in late-2018 and his five-month battle against the illness gained him not only sympathy, but appreciation from the WWE Universe. Many of the same critics who decried his 2015 Royal Rumble win and railed against his number-one ranking in the 2016 *PWI* "500" were impressed by his grace and tenacity.

His February 2019 announcement that his cancer was in remission and that he would be returning to the ring was met with sheer jubilation on *Monday Night Raw*. There seemed to be an understanding for most of 2019 and into the early months of 2020: As long as WWE didn't push him too hard or too fast, particularly in the world-championship picture, the once-relentless Reigns-haters would keep their hostility in check.

That understanding fractured early during the COVID-19 pandemic when Reigns pulled out of his

bout against Universal champion Bill Goldberg at WrestleMania 36. It was an easy choice for Reigns, considering his medical history and the young children in his household. The "Big Dog" seethed on social media after reading comments critical of his decision.

Said Reigns, "It's funny, because for years now, man, for years, people have been like, 'Don't show up at WrestleMania, we don't want you in it.' You know what I mean? There's, like, a nice handful of dudes and haters that didn't want me there, but the moment I made a choice for me and my family, I'm a coward, I'm a sissy ... But you don't know the whole story."

That's when Reigns stopped trying to be a corporate hero. The next time Reigns made a WWE appearance was at SummerSlam, where he wore a T-shirt that read "Wreck Everyone & Leave" as he demolished new Universal champ "The Fiend" Bray Wyatt and Braun Strowman after their title match. At the following *Smackdown*, he revealed Paul Heyman as his "special counsel." Two days later, at WWE's acclaimed Payback pay-per-view, Reigns showed up late for his three-way match also involving Wyatt and Strowman, and pinned "The Fiend" for the Universal championship.

Then came his epic feud with Jey Uso. When Jey competed for a shot at the Universal title, Reigns was insulted that Uso even viewed himself as being on the same level. Reigns attacked Uso on the September 25 edition of *Smackdown*, submitted Jey in a title defense at Clash of Champions (when brother Jimmy threw in the towel), and forced

Jey to say "I Quit" as he snared an injured Jimmy in a guillotine chokehold inside Hell in a Cell. Afterward, father Sika and uncle Afa presented Roman with a lei, recognizing him as the family's "Tribal Chief." Jey soon accepted that, too.

Reigns' warped mental abuse of Jey Uso continued in the weeks leading up to his match against WWE champion Drew McIntyre at Survivor Series, and although Jey helped him win, Reigns continued to belittle him in public.



WOMEN WRESTLERS MAKE HEADLINES

THE ROLE OF women in pro wrestling was reimagined in several ways in 2020—a year in which several stars made waves (for better or worse) in their professional and personal lives.

In January, Tessa Blanchard made history by beating Sami Callihan to become Impact Wrestling's first-ever female heavyweight champion. The third-generation competitor had earned the title opportunity by defeating several male top contenders in intergender bouts.

Although Impact officials were high on Blanchard, her reign proved controversial. The day before the win, Allysin Kay accused Blanchard of previously using racist language and spitting on a fellow wrestler in Japan (later named as La Rosa Negra). Blanchard denied the allegations, though several wrestlers—including La Rosa herself—supported Kay's claims.

After sheltering in place at her Mexico home early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Blanchard was slated to return to Impact to defend her title at June's Slammiversary pay-per-view. But, days before the event, the company cut ties with her and stripped her of the championship. Fightful later reported that Blanchard and Impact were unable to come to terms regarding promotion for Slammiversary.

In AEW, Nyla Rose made history by beating Women's champion Riho in February to become the first transgender wrestler to hold a major title in the U.S. The title change received mainstream media attention from *Sports Illustrated* and *Forbes*.

"I get why it's such a newsworthy item. And I do hope we get to a point where it's not mentioned," Rose said in a "Hotseat" interview with *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*. "But there also is that major sense of pride, because you don't see someone like myself portrayed in such a positive way. And, despite all the negativity, it's been received so well among a lot of people, especially in the mainstream."

Though Rose didn't get the long title reign she told *PWI* she was after, her win was a clear highlight in a year where wrestling was often mired in scandal.

Weeks after defending her Raw Women's championship against Shayna Baszler at WrestleMania, an emotional Becky Lynch announced that she was relinquishing the title she'd held for nearly 400 days because she and her fiancé Seth Rollins were expecting their first child. Lynch's departure opened the doors for several other female performers in WWE to grab the spotlight, including Sasha Banks and Bayley.

The reunited "Golden Role Models" at one point held every women's title on WWE's two main brands, with Bayley wearing the Smackdown Women's championship, Banks holding the Raw title, and together holding the Women's tag team title.

But the tension between Banks and Bayley, whose 2015 feud produced *PWI's* Match of the Year, ultimately doomed the team, which split in September. The two did battle inside Hell in a Cell in October, with Banks beating Bayley for the Smackdown title. A rematch on *Smackdown* in November drew the largest TV audience for any match on the show since March, according to *The Wrestling Observer*.

Bayley enjoyed, arguably, one of the most successful years of any woman in WWE history. Propelled by a record 380-day Smackdown Women's title reign, Bayley was ranked number 1 in *PWI's* "Women's 100" list. What's more, she and Banks ranked number 3 in the inaugural "Tag Team 50."



NYLA ROSE CELEBRATES A WIN OVER TAY CONTI ON DYNAMITE. IN A YEAR WHERE BAD NEWS WAS COMMONPLACE, ROSE BECAME AN INSPIRATION TO WRESTLING FANS WORLDWIDE.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

NJPW MAKES SOME BIG CHANGES

NEW JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING took some innovative steps to shake up its product in 2020, including doubling the size of its biggest annual event and doubling the number of belts worn by its top champion.

For the 14th edition of its signature show, NJPW broke up Wrestle Kingdom over two days—a move replicated by WWE three months later. The event took place on January 4th and 5th inside the famous Tokyo Dome. NJPW officials said the decision to supersize the annual New Year's event was in response to the surging popularity of the company—especially in a year when Tokyo was slated to host the Olympic Summer Games.

The change required NJPW to line up not one, but two massive main events worthy of the Wrestle Kingdom marquee. And that meant calling on the man who has become synonymous with Tokyo Dome main events over the last decade, Kazuchika Okada.

On night one, Okada retained his title in a 40-minute battle against G1 Climax winner Kota Ibushi. But the “Rainmaker’s” respite was short-lived, as the very next night he took on Tetsuya Naito—who had won the Intercontinental championship from Jay White the previous night—in an epic, winner-take-all main event.

In the end, Naito was able to complete his “Double-Gold Dash” by beating Okada with his Destino reverse DDT finisher, becoming the first wrestler to hold the IWGP heavyweight and Intercontinental titles simultaneously.

New Japan’s gamble of stretching Wrestle Kingdom over two nights appeared to pay off, as the event reportedly drew a combined 70,000 fans—roughly twice as many as the average attendance in the two previous years.

Unfortunately, NJPW’s momentum was derailed by the COVID-19 outbreak. Unlike other major promotions, like AEW and WWE, which

continued running shows throughout the pandemic, NJPW made the decision to completely shut down for several months in order to protect its talent and staff.

NJPW returned in June, initially running shows in empty arenas. When fans were allowed back into the buildings, it was under the condition that they not cheer or boo, so as to minimize the potential spread of the disease.

The company resumed shows with its annual New Japan Cup tournament, which was won by EVIL. With the win, EVIL earned the opportunity to challenge Naito at July’s Dominion event. In a major upset, EVIL beat Naito to capture the heavyweight and Intercontinental titles. But the newly minted Bullet Club member’s reign was short-lived, as he lost the belts back to Naito in his first defense in August.

New Japan’s other notable title change in 2020 took place not in the ring, but in the board room. NJPW president Harold Meij announced in September that he was resigning from his office, and would be replaced by Takami Ohbari.

Meij had held the office since May of 2018. And, although NJPW expanded its global footprint under Meij’s watch, the Dutch businessman also oversaw some questionable decisions, including allowing several top stars, like the Young Bucks and Kenny Omega, to leave the company and join AEW.

NEW JAPAN’S MOST CELEBRATED STAR, KAZUCHIKA OKADA, ENGAGES IN A SLUGFEST WITH G1 CLIMAX WINNER KOTA IBUSHI ON NIGHT ONE OF LAST JANUARY’S WRESTLE KINGDOM.



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AEW TURNS ONE; CONTINUES TO GROW

IN ITS FIRST full year of operation, All Elite Wrestling proved itself a major player in the global wrestling landscape ... and a legitimate competitor to WWE, which routinely lost the weekly battle for television viewers on Wednesday nights.

AEW started off 2020 with a bang, as—just three months after the debut of *Dynamite*—Warner Media announced it was extending AEW's Wednesday night flagship show through 2023. The deal was an acknowledgment of the early success of the upstart promotion, which had launched just a year earlier.

"We're now making the ultimate statement that the team of AEW and TNT is here to stay and to bring fans more of the great wrestling that the fans demand and deserve," AEW CEO Tony Khan said.

AEW continued to deliver on its promise of high-octane wrestling action in its first PPV event of the year, *Revolution*, which was held on February 29 in Chicago, Illinois. In addition to a long-awaited grudge match between MJF and Cody Rhodes, and a clash

between The Young Bucks and Kenny Omega & Adam Page that was praised as one of the best tag team matches in American history, the event saw AEW's first World title change.

Jon Moxley upended inaugural titleholder Chris Jericho to win the championship. With multiple successful defenses in the following months, Moxley became the first AEW wrestler to rank number one in the *PWI* "500." Moxley's career-year came about ten months after leaving WWE amid frustrations over his creative limitations there.

"Where I was at mentally at the beginning of 2019 was pretty low. So, for it to be 2020, and I'm sitting where I'm at now, it's pretty awesome," Moxley told *PWI*.

Like every other major wrestling promotion on the globe, AEW's momentum was dealt a blow by the COVID-19 pandemic. But the company continued running shows throughout the year out of Daily's Place, an outdoor arena in Jacksonville, Florida.

Buoyed by compelling storylines, like MJF's betrayal of best friend Cody Rhodes, innovative matches, like the wild eight-man Stadium Stampede at All or Nothing, and breakout stars, like Orange Cassidy, *Dynamite* was able to hold on to much of its television audience throughout the year—and beat Wednesday night rival NXT most weeks, both in total viewers and in the coveted 18-49 demographic.

The company's 2020 viewership peaked with its December 2 episode, dubbed "Winter is Coming," which featured a pay-per-view-worthy lineup. In the main event, Kenny Omega defeated Moxley to capture the AEW World title, ending Moxley's nine-month championship reign. Omega received help from longtime ally—and Impact Wrestling executive, Don Callis—sowing the seeds for an interpromotional storyline involving AEW and Impact.

But perhaps the biggest headline coming out of the event was the surprise debut of Sting, making his first appearance on TNT since the last episode of WCW's *Nitro* nearly two decades earlier. AEW later announced it had signed the 61-year-old icon to a long-term contract.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



AEW REALLY CAME INTO ITS OWN IN 2020, CAPPING OFF ITS FIRST FULL YEAR IN BUSINESS WITH A JAM-PACKED EPISODE OF *DYNAMITE* THAT FEATURED THE SURPRISE DEBUT OF STING.

SPEAKING OUT MOVEMENT ROCKS WRESTLING WORLD



ON THURSDAY, JUNE 18, a simple hashtag—*#SpeakingOut*—inspired a cascade of allegations, admissions, denials, and emotions, all part of a massive discussion about the sexual harassment and abuse of female talent, forcing a reckoning that somehow evaded the industry during the *#MeToo* movement of 2017-19.

One of the more high-profile cases involved Matt Riddle, who was set for his *Smackdown* debut the very next day. Wrestler Candy Cartwright, who had worked for EVOLVE with Riddle previously, accused the current WWE performer of sexual assault. Riddle's wife, Lisa Rennie, and his attorney claimed Cartwright had been stalking and harassing him for years. But text messages seemed to confirm an affair between the two at one point, which contradicted Riddle's initial claims to the contrary.

Riddle went on with his *Smackdown* debut, where WWE pushed him heartily until switching him to *Raw* as part of the 2020 draft in October. In the meantime, Cartwright filed a multi-million-dollar lawsuit against Riddle, WWE, EVOLVE, and former EVOLVE head Gabe Sapolsky in Cook County Circuit Court, citing the Illinois Gender Violence Act. WWE recently filed a motion to move the case to federal court, while Riddle filed to dismiss the suit against him. Following the initial allegations against him, Riddle had filed a restraining order against Cartwright, which he later voluntarily dismissed.

Following *#SpeakingOut*, WWE parted ways with a trio of British wrestlers accused of abuse or misconduct: Jack Gallagher, Travis Banks, and Ligero. Velvetten Dream was accused on multiple occasions of sending inappropriate texts to minors. He claimed a third party had sent the images. At the height of the scandal, he was reportedly involved in a major car accident and taken off TV. Velvetten Dream would later return to NXT, only to later quietly vanish again following a loss to Kushida.

But *#SpeakingOut* wasn't limited to WWE. AEW suspended Sammy Guevara for 30 days and ordered him to undertake sensitivity training. Guevara had appeared on a 2016 podcast, joking about sexually assaulting Sasha Banks. Jimmy Havoc faced emotional and sexual abuse accusations from an ex-girlfriend. He was released in

August, although AEW did not publicly connect the release to the allegations.

AEW's Allie reflected on *#SpeakingOut* in a candid social-media post: "For anyone wondering why it's so hard for women to speak out, they run the risk of not getting booked again, being accused of lying, the situation being downplayed, being made to look crazy, etc."

Impact Wrestling released Dave Crist, Michael Elgin, and Joey Ryan, all of whom faced sexual harassment or abuse allegations. Ring of Honor's head booker, Marty Scurll, was accused of taking advantage of an intoxicated 16-year-old girl in 2015. As of this writing, he hasn't competed for ROH since its post-COVID relaunch. Kelly Klein accused Jay Lethal of sexually harassing female peers, which Lethal denied. Lethal, who had previously been accused of harassment by Taeler Hendrix, issued a statement denying all claims against him.

Other accused figures were Dave Lagana (who resigned from the NWA), members of the CHIKARA promotion (which promptly shut down), and indie standout David Starr, who lost bookings and was stripped of titles around the world after a series of allegations against him.

The British scene, including NXT U.K. and PROGRESS Wrestling, was particularly implicated. Travis Banks, Joe Coffey, Jordan Devlin, Ligero, and Trent Seven were all accused of inappropriate conduct. PROGRESS severed ties with most of the accused wrestlers, while Banks and Ligero were released from their WWE contracts.

Labour Party member Alex Davies-Jones, who happens to be a wrestling fan, launched a parliamentary inquiry into the industry. In an interview with BBC Sport, she said, "The disturbing reality and lived experience for many female wrestlers is, more often than not, entrenched in misogyny ... Who should these young women turn to? Wrestling has fallen through the gaps because it's not necessarily a sport."

WWE POSTS MOST PROFITABLE YEAR EVER AMID PANDEMIC

HOW COULD A business traditionally reliant on live gates, merchandise sales, and world touring possibly thrive during the COVID-19 crisis? And how could its television product remain appealing with empty venues, no crowd energy, and LED screens replacing spectators? Shockingly, WWE revenues were higher than ever, thanks to multi-year TV-rights fees and remarkable e-commerce, both in terms of the WWE Network and WWEShop.com.

By the end of its third quarter, WWE had already earned \$118.2-million in net income. It had taken WWE a full 12 months to earn \$99.6-million in 2018, its previous record-setting year. This was accomplished without Co-Presidents George Barrios and Michelle Wilson, key players in WWE's success over the past decade, who were dismissed by Vince McMahon at the start of 2020.

And WWE had to absorb the loss of more than 250 live events this year. But that loss was offset by an uptick in WWE Network subscriptions, surging to 2.1 million during WrestleMania weekend—another all-time record—and maintaining at 1.6 million as of press time. More of a surprise was the blow-away revenue for WWE Shop, with locked-down fans ordering T-shirts, championship belts, and other merchandise, nearly doubling to \$12.6-million for the second quarter. And that figure didn't include WWE's substantial licensing agreements.

Considering that merchandising was the greatest revenue-driver at live events, Stanford executives reconsidered WWE's post-pandemic business model. If fans could be properly incentivized to visit WWE Shop, would a grueling road schedule be necessary? Fewer superstars suffered injuries in 2020—and most liked having additional time to spend with their families.

Of course, WWE's budget-cutting measures helped its bottom line, too, including the releases or furloughs of over 30 stars and producers.

COVID-19 also prompted WWE to construct the ThunderDome at Orlando's Amway Center and, later, St. Petersburg's Tropicana Field, as well as NXT's Capitol Wrestling Center at the WWE Performance Center. In addition to more lights and pyrotechnics, WWE purchased

thousands of LED screens—featuring home viewers to simulate live crowds—for those venues.

Ratings for WWE's television properties, particularly *Raw* on the USA Network, continued to be a concern. Rarely scoring above the two-million-viewer mark, *Raw*'s overall number of viewers plunged by about 25 percent in 2020. USA's overall network ratings dropped by about 30 percent; *Raw*, as a franchise program, was viewed as a major factor. Combine that with *NXT* losing to *AEW Dynamite* nearly every Wednesday night, and some USA execs began to view WWE as a weakening brand. *Smackdown*'s viewership numbers, while higher than *Raw*'s, still failed to achieve over two million viewers on a weekly basis.

Some analysts stated WWE's declining ratings were an inevitable symptom of today's media environment, with streaming continuing to encroach upon cable TV; the WWE Network and WWE's tremendous social-media presence more than compensated for those declines.

Not all investors were buying that. They suggested that WWE's high revenues from TV-rights fees may dwindle when it's time to renegotiate with USA and Fox. WWE stock remained relatively flat, between \$40 and \$50 per share for most of the year.

As 2020 came to a close, however, some investors pointed to the brand loyalty of the WWE Universe during the pandemic as a primary reason for optimism in 2021. ■

WWE'S THUNDERDOME WAS ONE OF MANY ATTEMPTS BY THE COMPANY TO CREATE A FEELING OF NORMALCY DURING A YEAR THAT WAS ANYTHING BUT.

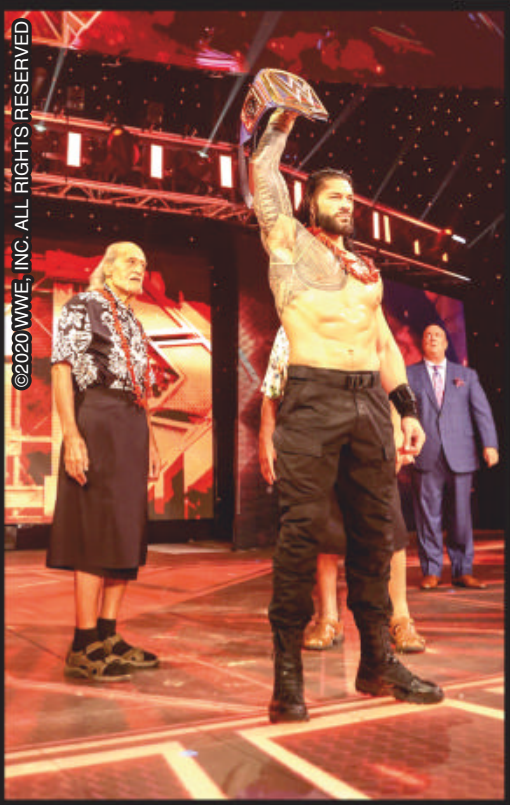


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2020 MEMORIES

HARRY BURKETT [SENIOR WRITER]

Brutality, vengeful pride, and misplaced loyalties brought to a boil a stew already simmering with selfishness and resentment. That was Roman Reigns' contribution to WWE in 2020. His association with special counsel Paul Heyman and his Brock Lesnar-style dominance of Smackdown and the Universal championship was almost an afterthought. Relatives such as Jimmy Uso and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson criticized Reigns' treatment of cousin Jey Uso, but mostly from the sidelines. And there's one image that remains with me: Sika and Afa Anoa'i presenting Roman with a lei, recognizing him as the "Tribal Chief" following his ruthless treatment of Jey inside Hell in a Cell. Families are complicated.



BRIAN SOLOMON [CONTRIBUTING WRITER]

Thirty years is a long time. In fact, it's the longest any active competitor has been with WWE in the company's history. And so, it was fitting that The Undertaker, the one and only "Phenom," who debuted for Vince McMahon at the 4th annual Survivor Series in 1990, should receive an epic sendoff last November at the 34th annual edition. I would've preferred if the luminaries invited to the event, including Ric Flair, Shawn Michaels, Big Show, Kane, and Kevin Nash, had been given a chance to actually speak. However, seeing 'Taker bask in that purple glow one last time, with the "ghost" of Paul Bearer looking on, was still an unforgettable sight.



ANDREA HANGST [CONTRIBUTING WRITER]

The COVID-19 pandemic forced professional wrestling to find creative ways for the show to go on. While some promotions chose to completely stop or pause doing shows, others chose to head outdoors as the weather warmed. ICW: No Holds Barred, GCW, and even AEW were among promotions that adapted to outdoor shows in order to stay in business. And while the circumstances that forced their hands have been horrible, once they finally come to an end, the outdoor wrestling might not. Warrior Wrestling's "Friday Night Fights series" took place at Marion Catholic's high school football stadium, bringing fans pro wrestling underneath suburban Chicago sunsets. GCW and Beyond Wrestling had shows on the Atlantic City Boardwalk, with a backdrop of the Atlantic Ocean. And shows at Indianapolis' White River State Park provided a new, unique locale for numerous shows all summer and autumn long. Pro wrestling breaking away from its traditional use of indoor venues for outdoor shows when the weather permits has perhaps been the only refreshing development in what has otherwise been a devastating year. And it might be the only thing from the pandemic era worth holding onto in 2021 and beyond.

PHOTO BY MIKEY NOLAN



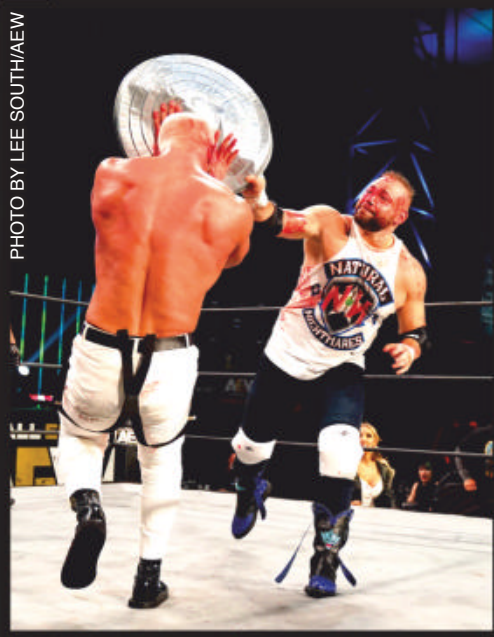
2020 MEMORIES

AL CASTLE [SENIOR WRITER]

I was supposed to attend my first AEW event on March 25, headlined by the much-anticipated “Blood and Guts” double-cage match. But, a week earlier, the Tri-State Area went into lockdown because of COVID-19, and the event was canceled. Oh well . . . at least I still had tickets to WrestleMania the following month. (You know how that turned out.) Impact’s Rebellion pay-per-view in April. New Japan’s return to Madison Square Garden in August. And many a Nassau Coliseum or Westchester County Center house show.

All were shows that I would have attended in person, but which were ultimately scrapped. And so, my lasting wrestling memory of 2020 is that I didn’t get to make any new wrestling memories all year long—at least not in person.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



LOUIE DEE [CONTRIBUTING WRITER]

COVID-19 had myriad effects on the sport, but one we may not see right away is a forced evolution of WWE’s business model. TV used to be the appetizer building to live events. But the modern era made PPV the steak, episodic TV its baked potato, and live events little more than an after-dinner mint. With live events halted completely and the WWE Network cannibalizing PPV, TV/Network rights fees became the entire meal. WWE’s current deals will keep the lights on for a while, but what happens if ratings decline and the next deals are less lucrative? A diet full of side dishes eventually becomes unhealthy, and for WWE to be “too big to fail,” the McMahons are gonna have to get creative in the kitchen.



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WALTER YEATES [CONTRIBUTING WRITER]

In 2020, the world lost Hana Kimura to suicide after she received an onslaught of abuse on various social media platforms. While the heinous words directed toward Hana did not originate from the wrestling community, fans should take the time to investigate how they communicate with wrestlers, fellow fans, and those in their daily lives. Wrestling should foster an accepting community for all who show decency to others who are enjoying the same medium as themselves.

While that is not always the case, we can make wrestling reflective of a positive world. It’s the least fans of Hana could do to honor her memory. Those who knew her continue to mourn, and we should remember our words do carry weight.

PHOTO BY YUICHI KOJIMA



PAT LAPRADE [CONTRIBUTING WRITER]

With or without fans in attendance, WrestleMania is always about WrestleMania moments. For Kevin Owens, that moment came in 2020.

Owens entered his first WrestleMania in 2016 as champion but left uncrowned. In 2017, he did win the U.S. title, a bittersweet victory as Vince McMahon told him it was one of the worst matches in WrestleMania history. In 2018, it was all about Daniel Bryan’s return, and, in 2019, creative had nothing for him. At WrestleMania 36, not only did Owens win his match—considered one

of the best that weekend—against Seth Rollins, but he also jumped off the WrestleMania sign and dropped an elbow on Rollins through a table. It took him five years, but he finally got a well-deserved WrestleMania moment to be proud of!



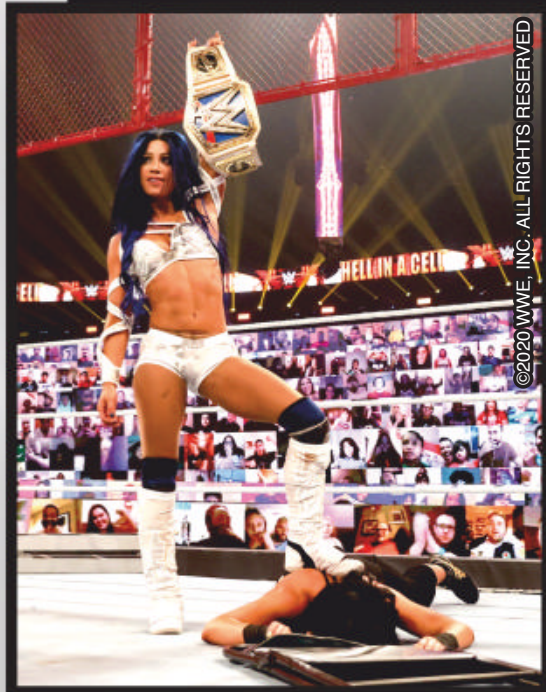
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2020 MEMORIES

KEVIN McELVANEY [EDITOR-IN-CHIEF]

Dating back to their NXT days, I've made little secret of the fact that I'm a big fan of both Bayley and Sasha Banks. Without hyperbole, I can say their battle at Hell in a Cell is some of the best work they've done together to date. Knowing they had a reputation to live up to, Banks and Bayley made creative use of the no-holds-barred environment, putting on a match that was both well-executed and emotionally resonant. The ending, which saw "The Boss"

overcome her former bestie with the help of a steel chair (weeks after Bayley had brutalized her with one), was pure poetry. As a fan, a journalist, and a human being, this is the kind of professional wrestling I live for.



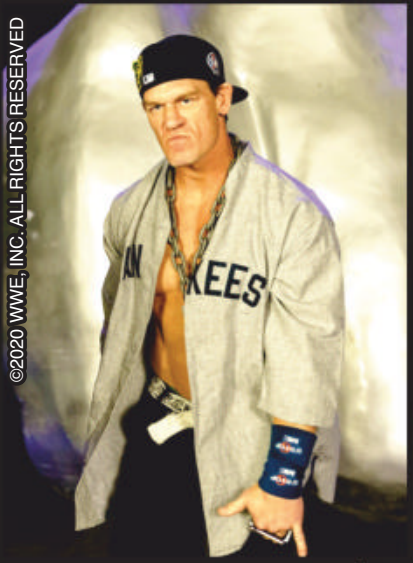
BRADY HICKS [CONTRIBUTING WRITER]

In wrestling, there are so few surprises. We got one at the 2020 Royal Rumble when Edge came home. I'll never forget the pre-pandemic spectacle of 42,000+ Houston fans tearfully standing and celebrating the multi-time champion's in-ring return. Then, Edge almost won the battle royal, and anything seemed possible. We soon learned more about the "Rated-R Superstar" through his memorable fights with Randy Orton. Some even think he has additional stories to tell. Regardless, the grizzled Edge of 2020 is so far removed from the man forced to limp away after a devastating injury nearly a decade ago. Whether Adam Copeland is destined for another world title or a more satisfying fadeaway, one thing remains clear: We thought we knew Edge, and we had no idea.



MIKE BESSLER [CONTRIBUTING WRITER]

Whether we knew it or not, we were already familiar with the concept of the "cinematic match" before WrestleMania 36. Lucha Underground and Impact Wrestling had already offered fans a few pre-taped spectacles that relied heavily on post-production. Moreover, the 'E had flirted with the likes of camera tricks and special effects in the past. But, with the Firefly Fun House Match, WWE finally shed any vestiges of realistic competition and the necessity of suspension of disbelief. It was a strange trip, replete with mind control, teleportation, and time warps. Longtime fans enjoyed some inside jokes and a throwback or two, and a new generation received a glimpse of where WWE is (probably) heading. For better or worse, the bout served as a harbinger of a new age in professional wrestling.



KRISTEN ASHLY [CONTRIBUTING WRITER]

On the August 22 episode of *Dynamite*, NWA Women's champion Thunder Rosa made her first AEW appearance, where she cut a promo against AEW Women's World champion Hikaru Shida, promising to bring the AEW women's division to the next level when she came for its title. In the following weeks, she did just that. In matches against Shida, Serena Deeb, Ivelisse, Diamante, and Lindsay Snow, Rosa revived the women's division during a time when most of AEW's female talent were not able to travel or were injured. Rosa's appearance at All Out 2020 against Shida for the AEW Women's title will always stand out to me as an important moment in women's wrestling. It seemed as if women's wrestling was finally being treated as the draw we all know it is, with an undeniable talent at the helm.



2020 MEMORIES

RIGHTEOUS REG [CONTRIBUTING WRITER]

PHOTO BY EARL GARDNER



The moment of the year for me was the show put on by Game Changer Wrestling and The Collective, headed by wrestler AJ Gray. For The Culture was the most important wrestling show of the year for me and many other wrestling fans. A show filled with the best Black

talent in the world with a main event of 2 Cold Scorpio vs. AR Fox, every match delivered on a show that overdelivered as a whole. Every wrestler wrestled with purpose to make sure this show was one of the most memorable of all-time. And everyone succeeded in a card filled with some of the best matches of the year. Made me proud as a Black wrestling fan. This show, with a couple other very important shows like Black Wrestlers Matter, proves that we have enough Black talent out there to shine in every wrestling company. Different characters and matches with people who just need the opportunity. I hope For The Culture isn't one and done.

ASHLEY MORRIS [CONTRIBUTING WRITER]

One cannot review the year without considering WALTER's NXT U.K. championship defense against Ilja Dragunov on the October 29 episode of *NXT U.K.* Their hard-hitting bout remains a "must-see" match for those who greatly appreciate the art of pro wrestling: simple, compelling storytelling coupled with the prowess of two athletes conveying intense emotion, brutality, in-ring ability, and fortitude through each maneuver, movement, mannerism, and facial expression.

The competitors' history with one another made for a highly enjoyable yet cringeworthy match, reminding us of WWE's ability to produce a solid, fan-favorite wrestling program. Both WALTER and Dragunov deserve continued high praise for what seems to be their innate ability to move fans to suspend belief and lose ourselves in an impressively violent, technical, and memorable encounter.



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JASON McVEIGH [CONTRIBUTING WRITER]

When 2020 began with Tessa Blanchard winning the Impact Wrestling championship, it felt like this would be the year when intergender wrestling reached the mainstream. Unfortunately, COVID-19, and the closure of the independent scene, stopped us from seeing a sea change in intergender wrestling. But that didn't mean new ground wasn't broken. For the first time in history, *PWI* ranked more than a dozen women in our annual "500" list (including Allie Kat, pictured), in recognition of the success they had in intergender bouts. Does this mean that one day the *PWI* "500" will be open to everyone,

regardless of which gender they primarily wrestle? Who knows? But I will remember 2020 as being the year when women firmly took their place at a table long occupied by men.

PHOTO BY MIKEY NOLAN



JAKE JOYCE [CONTRIBUTING WRITER]

Since becoming a fan of New Japan Pro-Wrestling, I've wanted nothing more than for Tetsuya Naito to have a healthy run with the IWGP heavyweight championship. My heart

was broken the night of Wrestle Kingdom 12, when Kazuchika Okada ended Naito's fiery-hot 2017 run to the top. However, leading up to the first-ever dual WK festivities, I knew this chase to the "Double Gold" was Naito's to take. As Naito pinned

Okada, and senior referee "Red Shoes" Unno made the three count, I erupted from my couch like I was 13 years old once again. Sure, KENTA cut Naito's celebration short, but I knew deep down, "This is Naito's year! 2020 is going to be the best one yet!" Yeah, about that ... whoops.



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THEN AND NOW

In July 2010, Xavier Woods (as Austin Creed) celebrates with the coveted Super 8 trophy after beating Tommaso Ciampa in the tournament final.



In November 2020, Woods and Kofi Kingston bask in a successful tag title defense against The Hurt Business. As of this writing, The New Day are 10-time world tag team champions.

PWI OFFICIAL RATINGS

FOR PERIOD ENDED
DECEMBER 12, 2020

HEAVYWEIGHT

- 1 KENNY OMEGA**
203, Winnipeg, MB
(-) AEW & AAA champion
- 2 TETSUYA NAITO**
225, Tokyo, Japan
(2) IWGP/Intercontinental champion
- 3 ROMAN REIGNS**
265, Pensacola, FL
(3) WWE Universal champion
- 4 DREW MCINTYRE**
(6) 265, Ayr, Scotland
(2) #1 contender WWE title
- 5 RICH SWANN**
200, Baltimore, MD
(7) Impact heavyweight champion
- 6 FINN BALOR**
190, Bray, Ireland
(5) NXT heavyweight champion
- 7 JACOB FATU**
300, Samoa
(-) MLW heavyweight champion
- 8 SHUN SKYWALKER**
183, Gifu, Japan
(-) Dragon Gate champion
- 9 BOBBY LASHLEY**
273, Junction City, KS
(10) WWE U.S. champion
- 10 DARBY ALLIN**
180, Seattle, WA
(-) AEW TNT champion



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BIANCA BELAIR

WOMEN

- 1 SASHA BANKS**
115, Fairfield, CA
(1) Smackdown Women's champion
- 2 UTAMI HAYASHISHITA**
142, Kagoshima, Japan
(-) World of Stardom champion
- 3 ASUKA**
137, Osaka, Japan
(3) Raw Women's champion
- 4 SERENA DEEB**
130, Fairfax, VA
(6) NWA Women's champion
- 5 DEONNA PURRAZZO**
112, Livingston, NJ
(1) Knockouts champion
- 6 HIKARU SHIDA**
126, Kanagawa, Japan
(5) AEW Women's champion
- 7 IO SHIRAI**
119, Kanagawa, Japan
(4) NXT Women's champion
- 8 CANDICE LERAE**
(-) 110, Riverside, CA
- 9 RAQUEL GONZALEZ**
(-) 176, Rio Grande Valley, TX
- 10 BIANCA BELAIR**
(-) 134, Knoxville, TN

WWE RAW

WWE Champion:

- DREW MCINTYRE**
(1) 265, Ayr, Scotland
- 1—BOBBY LASHLEY**
(2) 273, Colorado Springs, CO
 - 2—RANDY ORTON**
(C) 250, St. Louis, MO
 - 3—AJ STYLES**
(-) 218, Gainesville, GA
 - 4—MUSTAFA ALI**
(-) 182, Chicago, IL
 - 5—BRAY WYATT**
(1) 286, Brooksville, FL
 - 6—KEITH LEE**
(4) 340, Wichita Falls, TX
 - 7—BRAUN STROWMAN**
(-) 386, Sherrills Ford, NC
 - 8—CEDRIC ALEXANDER**
(10) 205, Charlotte, NC
 - 9—SHELTON BENJAMIN**
(9) 248, Orangeburg, SC
 - 10—ALEISTER BLACK**
(5) 215, Amsterdam, Holland

SMACKDOWN

Universal Champion:

- ROMAN REIGNS**
(C) 265, Pensacola, FL
- 1—JEY USO**
(2) 227, San Francisco, CA
 - 2—SAMI ZAYN**
(1) 212, Montreal, QC
 - 3—BIG E**
(4) 285, Tampa, FL
 - 4—REY MYSTERIO**
(-) 175, San Diego, CA
 - 5—SETH ROLLINS**
(5) 217, Davenport, IA
 - 6—OTIS**
(6) 311, Duluth, MN
 - 7—KEVIN OWENS**
(-) 266, Marienville, QC
 - 8—DANIEL BRYAN**
(-) 210, Aberdeen, WA
 - 9—KING CORBIN**
(-) 275, Kansas City, MO
 - 10—MURPHY**
(-) 225, Melbourne, Australia

AEW

World Heavyweight Champion:

- KENNY OMEGA**
(8) 229, Winnipeg, MB
- 1—DARBY ALLIN**
(-) 180, Seattle, WA
 - 2—JON MOXLEY**
(C) 224, Cincinnati, OH
 - 3—BRIAN CAGE**
(-) 278, Chico, CA
 - 4—MJF**
(5) 216, Plainview, NY
 - 5—CODY RHODES**
(1) 220, Atlanta, GA
 - 6—ORANGE CASSIDY**
(6) 180, Stewartsville, NJ
 - 7—CHRIS JERICHO**
(7) 227, Winnipeg, MB
 - 8—EDDIE KINGSTON**
(2) 240, Yonkers, NY
 - 9—ADAM PAGE**
(9) 228, Aaron's Creek, VA
 - 10—PAC**
(-) 194, Newcastle, UK

IMPACT

Heavyweight Champion:

- RICH SWANN**
(C) 200, Baltimore, MD
- 1—TJP**
(-) 167, The Phillipines
 - 2—CHRIS BEY**
(5) 180, Alexandria, VA
 - 3—ROHIT RAJU**
(1) 172, Saginaw, MI
 - 4—MOOSE**
(3) 295, Atlanta, GA
 - 5—ERIC YOUNG**
(2) 232, Nashville, TN
 - 6—WILLIE MACK**
(7) 280, Los Angeles, CA
 - 7—KEN SHAMROCK**
(6) 243, Reno, NV
 - 8—SAMI CALLIHAN**
(8) 207, Bellefontaine, OH
 - 9—EDDIE EDWARDS**
(9) 214, Boston, MA
 - 10—BRIAN MYERS**
(-) 223, Glen Cove, NY

Top 10 and Tag Team ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or tag team. These ratings are compiled by a committee consisting of Kevin McElvaney, Pat Laprade, Kris Zellner, Louie Dee, Harry Burkett, and STRIGGA (cagematch.net, purolove.com). The numbers in parenthesis indicate a wrestler's position in that category last issue. If you're a promoter wishing to make a submission to the agate-sized ratings, email us at pwireresults@yahoo.com (please put the word "ratings" in the subject line).

TAG TEAMS

- 1

MATT & NICK JACKSON
Combined weight: 350 pounds
(-) AEW tag team champions
- 2

MONTEZ FORD & ANGELO DAWKINS
Combined weight: 492 pounds
(2) Smackdown tag team champions
- 3

KOFI KINGSTON & XAVIER WOODS
Combined weight: 417 pounds
(4) Raw tag team champions
- 4

DAX HARWOOD & CASH WHEELER
Combined Weight: 446 pounds
(1) #1 contenders for AEW tag title
- 5

KARL ANDERSON & DOC GALLOWS
Combined weight: 505 pounds
(-) Impact Wrestling tag team champions
- 6

ZACK SABRE JR. & TAICHI
Combined weight: 428 pounds
(5) IWGP World tag team champions
- 7

SAYA KAMITANI & UTAMI HAYASHISHITA
Combined weight: 271 pounds
(-) Stardom tag team champions
- 8

DANNY BURCH & ONEY LORCAN
Combined weight: 380 pounds
(7) NXT tag team champions
- 9

TAMA TONGA & TANGA LOA
Combined weight: 430 pounds
(-) World Tag League winners
- 10

NIA JAX & SHAYNA BASZLER
Combined weight: 422 pounds
(6) WWE Women's tag team champions

ACTION WRESTLING: 1-AC Mack; 2-Arik Royal; 3-Anthony Henry; 4-Fred Yehi; 5-Adam Priest; 6-Matt Sells; 7-Logan Creed; 8-Graham Bell; 9-Bobby Flaco; 10-Cabana Man Dan

DRAGON GATE: CHAMPION-Shun Skywalker; 1-Ben-K; 2-Eita; 3-Keisuke Okuda; 4-Kai; 5-Dragon Dia; 6-SB Kento; 7-YAMATO; 8-Kaito Ishida; 9-HipHop Kikuta; 10-BxB Hulk

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION: CHAMPION-Joey Ace; 1-Eric Martin; 2-Mr. Ooh La-La; 3-Travis Lee; 4-Mike Law; 5-Greg Spitz; 6-Teddy Fine; 7-Sam Shields; 8-Rey Calitri; 9-Napalm; 10-Chris Rockwell

MEXICO: 1-El Terrible; 2-Angel de Oro; 3-Valiente; 4-Niebla Roja; 5-Soberano, Jr.; 6-Laredo Kid; 7-Pagano; 8-Ultimo Guerrero; 9-Chessman; 10-Felino

NEW SOUTH PRO WRESTLING: CHAMPION-Derek Neal; 1-Donnie Janela; 2-Brett Ison; 3-Cabana Man Dan; 4-The Mongrel; 5-Tyler Franks; 6-Suge D; 7-Shean Christopher; 8-Adam Priest; 9-Jaden Newman; 10-2 Fly Ty

NXT U.K.: CHAMPION-WALTER; 1-Ilja Dragunov; 2-A-Kid; 3-Joe Coffey; 4-Trent Seven; 5-Rampage Brown; 6-Jordan Devlin; 7-Noam Dar; 8-Saxon Huxley; 9-Eddie Dennis; 10-Dave Mastiff

PRO WRESTLING EGO: CHAMPION-JD Jenkins; 1-Rey Fury; 2-Nightmare; 3-Wes Warren; 4-RJ Williams; 5-Walker Hayes; 6-Ursa Major; 7-Zay Washington; 8-Aaron Roberts; 9-Colt Storm; 10-Brad Lee

PRO WRESTLING MAGIC: CHAMPION-Smiley; 1-KC Navarro; 2-Ace Romero; 3-Sebastian Cage; 4-Sanchez; 5-Meadowlands Monster; 6-Adam Payne; 7-Everett Cross; 8-Darius Carter; 9-MV Young; 10-Killian McMurphy

WESTSIDE XTREME WRESTLING: CHAMPION-Bobby Gunns; 1-Marius Al-Ani; 2-Cara Noir; 3-Metehan; 4-Tristan Archer; 5-Avalanche; 6-Senza Volto; 7-Fast Time Moodo; 8-Prince Ahura; 9-Norman Harras; 10-Vincent Heisenberg

ROH

Heavyweight Champion:
RUSH
(C) 225, Jalisco, Mexico

1—**BRODY KING**
(-) 285, Los Angeles, CA

2—**JONATHAN GRESHAM**
(3) 175, Atlanta, GA

3—**DRAGON LEE**
(2) 214, Jalisco, Mexico

4—**FLIP GORDON**
(-) 189, Kalispell, MT

5—**JOSH WOODS**
(6) 220, West Palm Beach, FL

6—**JAY LETHAL**
(5) 215, Elizabeth, NJ

7—**SHANE TAYLOR**
(-) 315, Cleveland, OH

8—**PCO**
(1) 300, Montreal, QC

9—**MATT TAVEN**
(10) 219, Boston, MA

10—**DAK DRAPER**
(5) 250, Denver, CO

NXT

Heavyweight Champion:
FINN BALOR
(C) 190, Bray, Ireland

1—**JOHNNY GARGANO**
(3) 199, Cleveland, OH

2—**LEON RUFF**
(-) 150, Pensacola, FL

3—**DAMIAN PRIEST**
(2) 248, New York, NY

4—**KUSHIDA**
(7) 187, Tokyo, Japan

5—**TOMMASO CIAMPA**
(3) 201, Milwaukee, WI

6—**SANTOS ESCOBAR**
(6) 198, Mexico City, Mexico

7—**TIMOTHY THATCHER**
(10) 228, Sacramento, CA

8—**DEXTER LUMIS**
(8) 238, Jacksonville, FL

9—**CAMERON GRIMES**
(9) 220, Cameron, NC

10—**ADAM COLE**
(4) 210, Panama City, FL

NEW JAPAN

IWGP World Champion:
TETSUYA NAITO
(C) 225, Tokyo, Japan

1—**JAY WHITE**
(8) 220, Auckland, NZ

2—**SHINGO TAKAGI**
(9) 212, Yamanashi, Japan

3—**EVIL**
(3) 234, Mishima, Japan

4—**SANADA**
(2) 220, Niigata, Japan

5—**TAIJI ISHIMORI**
(7) 165, Tagajo, Japan

6—**KENTA**
(4) 187, Saitama, Japan

7—**KAZUCHIKA OKADA**
(6) 236, Tokyo, Japan

8—**KOTA IBUSHI**
(1) 205, Kagoshima, Japan

9—**EL DESPERADO**
(-) 198, Niigata, Japan

10—**DAVID FINLAY**
(-) 209, Atlanta, GA

MLW

Heavyweight Champion:
JACOB FATU
(C) 300, Samoa

1—**ALEX HAMMERSTONE**
(1) 251, Phoenix, AZ

2—**LOW KI**
(9) 174, Brooklyn, NY

3—**TOM LAWLOR**
(5) 205, Las Vegas, NV

4—**LA PARK**
(-) 302, Monclova, Mexico

5—**MYRON REED**
(3) 173, Louisville, KY

6—**RICHARD HOLLIDAY**
(6) 237, Westport, CT

7—**ACH**
(-) 222, Austin, TX

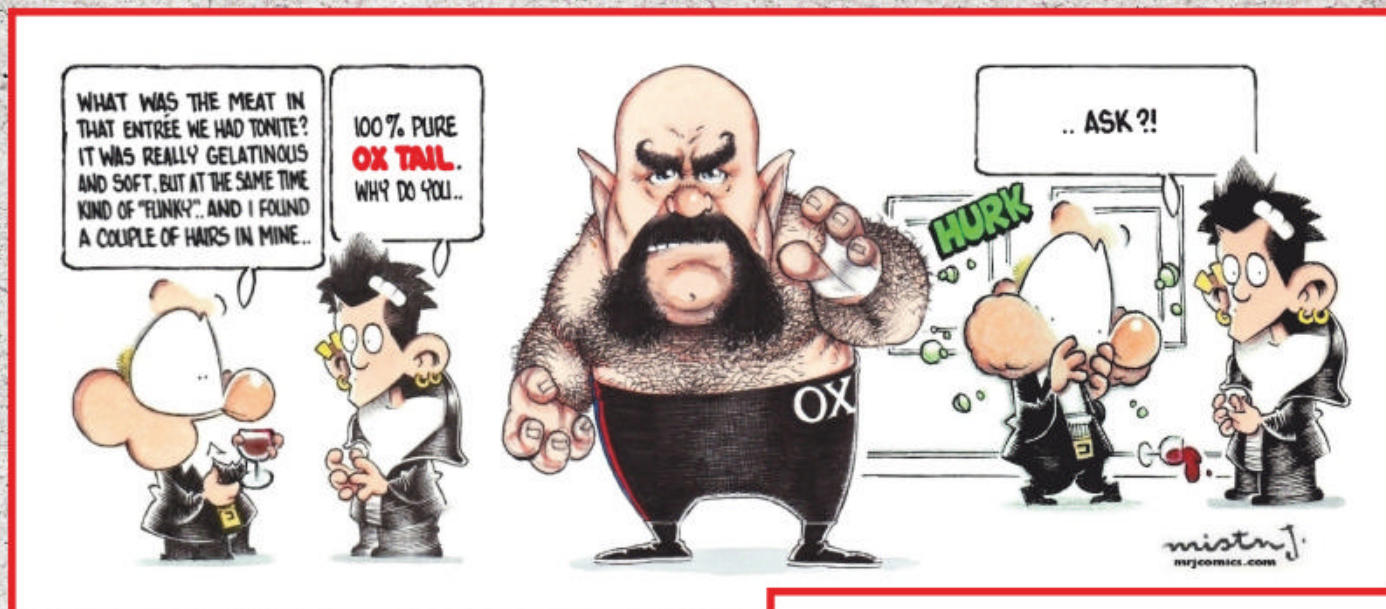
8—**LAREDO KID**
(-) 198, Nuevo Laredo, Mexico

9—**CALVIN TANKMAN**
(-) 355, Indianapolis, IN

10—**MADS KRUGGER**
(-) UNK, UNKNOWN

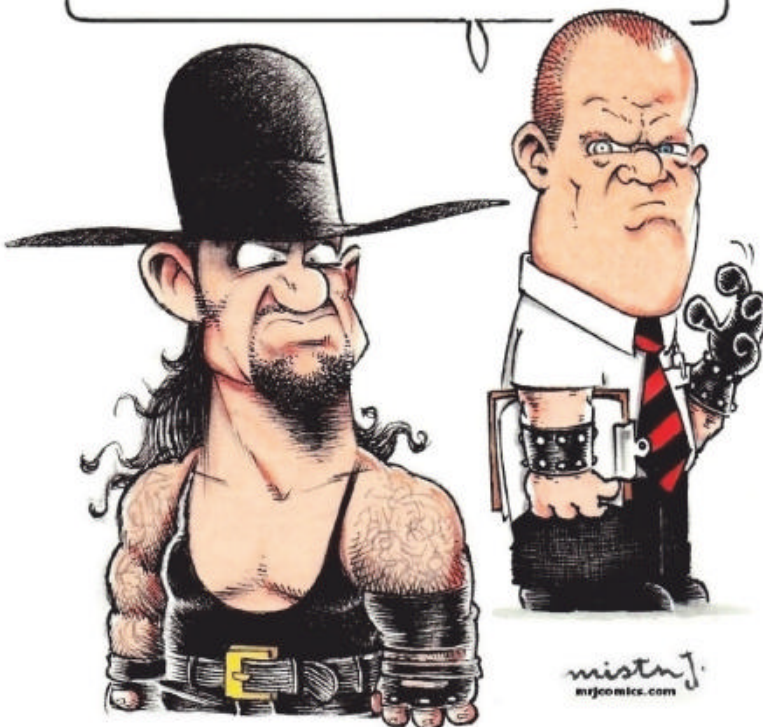
DRAWING BLOOD

BY JASON CONLAN



HEEL WRESTLERS RE-INVENTED FOR THE MODERN ERA

SO, WWE MAKES A BIG DEAL OF THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNDERTAKER & YET THE COMMEMORATION FOR ISAAC YANKEM'S 25TH, AND FAKE DIESEL'S 24TH, ARE NOWHERE TO BE FOUND... **TYPICAL!**



SOYLENT GREEN IS PEOPLE. BRUCE WILLIS WAS DEAD ALL ALONG. ROSEBUD IS JUST A SLED. JIGSAW IS IN THE ROOM. DARTH VADER IS LUKE'S FATHER. CHRISTIAN BALE IS TWINS. TYLER DURDEN IS A FIGMENT OF THE NARRATOR'S IMAGINATION. VERBAL KINT IS KEYSER SÖZE. AND THE PLANET OF THE APES IS ACTUALLY EARTH.



NO.42 THE SPOILER.



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